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ABSTRACT

Spotlighting a variety of venerable poets, as well as some rising stars, this book is the second series of conversations about the lives and works of poets who write mainly for children and young people. The book presents informal interviews with the writers about their childhoods, the influences upon their work, their writing processes, how they would like to see their work introduced to youngsters, and what suggestions they have for young poetry writers. The 20 poets interviewed in the book are: J. Patrick Lewis, Marilyn Singer, Cynthia Rylant, Paul Fleischman, Brod Bagert, Lillian Morrison, Ashley Bryan, Jane Yolen, Luis J. Rodriguez, Deborah Chandra, Paul Janeczko, Michael Spooner, Constance Levy, Nikki Giovanni, Patricia Hubbell, Victor Martinez, Lucille Clifton, Maxine Kumin, Judith Thurman, and Nancy White Carlstrom. Each interview is preceded by a very brief overview of the poet's life and work. (NKA)

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Speaking of Poets 2

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Jeffrey S. Copeland and Vicky L. Copeland

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Speaking of Poets 2

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More Interviews with Poets Who Write for Children and Young Adults

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For Crystal, with love

J.C.-V.C.

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Introduction

This book is the continuation of a project begun in the fall of 1991 when the Editorial Board of the National Council of Teachers of English approved a proposal for a book that would explore the lives and works of poets writing today for children and young adults. Included in volume 1, *Speaking of Poets: Interviews with Poets Who Write for Children and Young Adults* (1993), were Arnold Adoff, Lilian Moore, Mel Glenn, Aileen Fisher, Karla Kuskin, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Mary Ann Hoberman, Myra Cohn Livingston, Valerie Worth, Lee Bennett Hopkins, X. J. Kennedy, Gary Soto, Eloise Greenfield, Barbara Juster Esbensen, William Cole, and Eve Merriam. The sixteen poets included in that volume represent just the tip of the vast mountain that is poetry written for young readers. For this reason, a second volume was planned—one that would continue this examination of poets who represent a full range of backgrounds, personalities, philosophies, and styles of writing. And, for this second volume, another element would be included: a special emphasis upon newer, emerging poets.

The poets included in this volume were chosen by a selection process that consisted of three stages. First, over the past year as we spoke at conferences and professional meetings about the poets included in volume 1, invariably it seemed someone would ask, "Well, what about So-and-So? Are you going to interview him/her?" Immediately, we started making a list of those most frequently asked about by teachers, librarians, and young readers. Second, through a modified "reputational selection" process, the poets included in volume 1 were asked to recommend poets they believed should be included in a second volume. They were also asked to give special consideration to those new to the field of poetry for children and young adults and those whose work might not be that well known nationally—but, in their opinions, *should* be known. At this point, the lists were combined into one master list of poets that was then sent to leaders of the Children's Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, and they were asked to help choose the poets to be included in the volume.

At the same time, we asked members of the Children's Literature Assembly to make suggestions related to the format of the interviews. It was decided that the same interview format used in the first volume would be continued, which included questions designed specifically for and tailored to the work of the individual poets. The use of specific questions invited the poets to move deep inside their own works and habits as writers. As many of the poets to be included could be considered newer, emerging poets, it was also decided that another component would be added, where appropriate, to the interviews: Special emphasis would be placed upon information of a biographical nature. For many of the poets, biographical information and early publishing histories simply were not available through other sources. In effect, the interviews would serve as introductions to these poets and their works, and we believed the biographical information would bring an additional slice of humanity to the writings of these gifted writers.

Next, the poets to be included in this second volume, an all-star list of those who write for the young, were contacted and asked to become part of the project. Among those to be interviewed, two—Paul Fleischman and Cynthia Rylant—had written books that had been awarded the Newbery Medal. Jane Yolen had written a book that was granted the Caldecott Medal. Ashley Bryan had been granted the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award. Judith Thurman had been granted the National Book Award. The PEN West/Josephine Miles Award for Literary Excellence had been given to Luis Rodriguez. Maxine Kumin had been granted the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. And the list of awards did not stop there. Others, like J. Patrick Lewis, Brod Bagert, and Nancy White Carlstrom, were several volumes into what were already outstanding writing careers that will continue to flourish through the years. Still others were just beginning to make their marks on the field of poetry for the young. Victor Martinez, Michael Spooner, Deborah Chandra, and Constance Levy had just recently published their first books of poetry. When contacted, all, with great enthusiasm, responded that they would be more than happy to talk about their lives, their works, and their views about the world of poetry for children and young adults. As a matter of fact, it was typical for the poets to begin sharing information about their lives and writings during those initial contacts—even before the interviews were scheduled. Their enthusiasm was contagious.

Arranging the interviews for this project brought to light once again the fact that poets who write for children and young adults have to be some of the more well-traveled people on the planet. Most mentioned the pride they felt in and the enjoyment they received from going into libraries and schools to conduct readings and workshops. Not once was a negative comment heard about all the travel and preparation required to conduct those sessions. In working around their travel plans and presentations, some of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the poets, some at conferences and professional meetings, and some, of necessity, by telephone. These interviews and follow-up sessions took us from Constance Levy's beautiful home in St. Louis, Missouri, where the hours flew by as we discussed her evolution as a writer, to an NCTE conference in Louisville, Kentucky, where we had a delightful, laugh-filled visit with Brod Bagert, to a telephone interview with Nancy White Carlstrom, who was seated in the log cabin that serves as her writing studio in Fairbanks, Alaska.

As the interviews were conducted, several common elements or patterns emerged. First, the poets took great pleasure in talking about the world of poetry for the young. In most cases, it was nearly impossible to place closure on the interviews. They were interested in continuing the discussions long after the formal portion of the interview was completed. They were also interested in hearing information about what the other poets were doing. Poets who write for the young comprise a close-knit fraternity. Most were either friends with or at least have had occasion to meet with and share their views with each other. Also, as the interviews were conducted, it became obvious that they find great satisfaction in fostering and promoting each other's careers.

At the same time, while the poets found great pleasure in talking about poetry in general, many felt somewhat uncomfortable about specific analysis of their own styles of writing for one common reason: They wondered if too much analysis of their own craft might make them so self-conscious that they would end up with a form of writer's block. For some, the comment was made tongue-in-cheek; others were somewhat more nervous about those discussions.

For most of the poets, their fertile imaginations grew from vivid and wonderful childhoods. In describing their early years, the poets poured forth a sea of "sensory impressions." Constance Levy recalled the sweet scent of tall grass as she slid down steep hills during rowdy outdoor games. Brod Bagert had sharp memories of the texture of mats used in tumbling during his short stint in gymnastics. Victor Martinez can still hear the determined wail of small children in his family, which included twelve brothers and sisters. Ashley Bryan has etched in memory a moment of being awe-struck by the sight of a majestic church in his neighborhood. Judith Thurman mentioned the cold fear felt when bats swooped down near her while on her grandmother's porch. Through these impressions, today all are able to think, while writing, as children—to put themselves back in time in order to capture the excitement and wonder of childhood. It was interesting that although most had their own children around while writing, they chose not to write through the eyes of those children. Rather, the poets made a point of saying they now write through memory, through their own eyes and experiences as youngsters.

In a related vein, most recalled reading as a major part of their young lives and had vivid memories of the books and writers, which represented the full range of literature and authors, that influenced them. Jane Yolen recalled reading and treasuring the works of William Butler Yeats, Rudyard Kipling, and James Thurber, who was a family friend. Michael Spooner cited the works of Robert Frost, e. e. cummings, and Walt Whitman as providing a great influence on his development as a writer. Patricia Hubbell said her style of writing was shaped by the reading of Christina Rossetti and Theodore Roethke. Maxine Kumin said that Louisa May Alcott was her literary heroine. Here, two points emerged. One: Very few mentioned reading the works of the same writers. A common reading "core" did not emerge. Emily Dickinson seemed to be the lone, common link. Well over half of the poets listed Dickinson's work as having a great influence on their development as poets. And two: Most expressed fond memories of sharing their reading experiences with others—family, friends, or neighbors. In many instances, this sharing time—being read to at bedtime, the family reading together in the evening after dinner, parents reading the morning paper aloud—was listed as much more important in their development as writers than the literature actually read. For the poets, experiences like these led to a joy in reading that mushroomed as the years moved by.

The poets were also very similar in their views related to how to get young readers interested in writing and reading poetry. Many suggested that young writers do as they do and keep journals, which can serve as storehouses for images, details, and feelings. Later, they can turn to these and draw out information that will greatly enrich their writings. In essence, they felt these journals could serve to freeze memory and make childhood impressions accessible throughout their lives. Most poets also suggested that youngsters write first and worry about "quality considerations" later. In other words, they encourage young writers first to concentrate upon "getting words on paper," because so much of writing growth comes through time, through gaining life experience. Related to this, Paul Janeczko spoke of writing what he considers "pretty bad" poetry when he was younger. This was echoed by Brod Bagert, who now feels sorry for his dates who had to sit through the reading of his early poems. These wonderful writers were saying that poets, in many ways, have to "season." They wanted young writers to *know that this is a normal part of the process of growing and maturing* as a writer.

In terms of sharing poetry with young readers, one refrain kept surfacing among the poets: Make poetry exciting! They felt that above all, poetry should be read aloud—and with great feeling and enthusiasm. Brod Bagert and Ashley Bryan are the reigning champions of the belief that poetry is shared best when it is performed. And, when possible, this performance should coincide with direct observation of the events or ideas presented in a poem. Marilyn Singer supported this belief when she said that taking children outside to observe the actions of birds before or during the reading of her poems about these interesting creatures would make her poetry all the more meaningful and enjoyable.

At the same time, a majority of the poets believed that young readers *should* be taught the elements of poetry, because this knowledge can help them better understand the craft of the poet and therefore help them become better readers and writers of poetry. However, they would like to see this knowledge gained through the reading of poetry, not through study of the elements in isolation. In other words, several mentioned that they hoped an area like metrics didn't end up being nothing more than an exercise in memorizing accent marks drawn on the chalkboard; they encourage those who work with young readers to enthusiastically present poems that use these elements in special ways, making them jump to life. Most also believed that poetry could best be shared in the schools by including it in all subject areas in all areas of the curriculum. They did not see it as the sole province of the language arts classroom; rather, they thought poetry needed to be shared by all teachers and librarians as often as possible. The poets also believed that memorization of favorite poems was important, because youngsters would always have these to draw from in future years as they evolved as readers and writers. Many poets said that poems they memorized as youngsters formed the "cornerstone" of their love for poetry.

While the poets were similar in many respects, they differed greatly in one area: how they work as writers. In terms of the process of composing their poems, they are as different as colors of the spectrum. When Marilyn Singer starts to wind down or has a difficult time coming up with ideas, she stands and sings a song from one of her favorite musicals. This invigorates her and gives her the drive to continue. Ashley Bryan has a series of studios in his home. For him, each part of the composing process is completed in a separate studio arranged specifically for that type of work. When Victor Martinez needs inspiration, he takes a walk and picks up pens and pencils he finds in the street. He then tries to imagine the person who dropped the items and draws from those images for writing material. Patricia Hubbell does some of her best thinking and prewriting while working in her garden. Cynthia Rylant has ideas come to her in a flurry of creativity; she wrote one of her books of poetry in just a few short days. Paul Fleischman, on the other hand, is a meticulous artist who may spend an entire day writing a single page of prose or poetry. However, this single page will not need further revising or editing. For the poets, the means may differ, but the end results do not. All are crafting magnificent writings that will continue to delight and entertain generations of young readers.

And finally, after interviewing all the poets, one special message, one overall philosophy, seemed to echo in a chorus of their voices: The world is an exciting place, a place where all possibilities exist for all people. It is a world populated by a true "family of humanity." It is a world of magic and joy. It is a world just waiting to be explored, and this exploration can begin right now—through poetry.

J. Patrick Lewis

Readers of J. Patrick Lewis's poetry have come to expect the unexpected. Lewis tends to write in "traditional" forms and structures, but there is nothing traditional about the images that burst forth from the lines of his poems—readers suddenly encounter a hummingbird with "helicopter wings" or a pelican with a "faceful of luggage." These images, in combination with masterful wordplay, produce poems that both delight and challenge the reader. As a writer, Lewis is a creature of habit who says, "Images come with somewhat more perspiration than inspiration." He takes great pride in the fact that a single poem may be the final result of hours of painstaking research, which produces accuracy and precision of detail—both hallmarks of his writing.

Lewis's writing for young readers came about in what he calls an "odd way." For years he focused his attention on writing scholarly articles within the field of economics. However, while on vacation with his family, he visited a natural phenomenon called the "Moonbow." Inspired by this wonder, he set out to write The Moonbow of Mr. B. Bones *(1992), a book chosen by* School Library Journal *as one of the Best Books for 1992. From that inspired beginning to the present, Lewis has continued to share with young readers his love and respect for both the amazing and the commonplace in the natural world.*

Today, J. Patrick Lewis, the father of three, lives in Westerville, Ohio, where he is also a professor of economics at Otterbein College.

VC: Please tell us about where you grew up and about your family.

JPL: I always like to think that I had a ridiculously normal childhood. I grew up in Gary, Indiana, in the 1950s. My twin brother, Mick, has always been my closest friend. He now lives in Kentucky. I have another brother, Tim, four years younger, who lives in Tennessee. All of my early experiences as I recall them were based around family. My parents were wonderful. I didn't really have any traumatic experiences growing up that I can think of. We are all still very close and get together as much as we can. I wish I could say I had this really weird life as a gandy dancer or a nightclub bouncer, but I didn't. Many writers have "normal" lives; my childhood certainly was.

Growing up, my brother was the brainy one, and I was more sports-minded. I didn't get serious about anything, especially academics, until I got to college. When I was younger I played basketball. I was only five foot nine inches, but I did manage to play on the high school team. I also played football and baseball, but basketball was my favorite. When I got to college I did a Jekyll and Hyde routine. I had a personality change and realized how much I had missed, so I turned into a real grind, a bookworm, and I'm afraid I've been one ever since. I decided fairly early when I went right into a master's degree program that I was going to be a college teacher. I've never looked back, have never done anything else. I started teaching college at twenty-five, and I've been doing it ever since.

VC: Was there a particular spark that led to your writing career?

JPL: To me, people do things in life that are a function of the people they've met. The people I met were all in the social sciences. I didn't take to literature until quite late in my schooling. I suspect that was in large part because I didn't meet an English professor who told me to get serious about writing. The notion of being a writer and making a career as a writer was something that never occurred to me. I didn't start writing for children until much later. I've always liked to write, but I always thought I'd be writing in my field, which is economics. My first writings were bone-dry academic articles that nobody reads. I finally said to myself, "This is silly. If I'm going to write, I want to be read." Then I began doing book reviews for national and regional publications. I got a kick out of that and still do. However, it doesn't come close to the satisfaction that I get from being able to turn a phrase in a poem for children. So, as I move into the twilight years, writing is what I know I want to do. If I were somehow denied writing, it would be like losing a major part of my life.

VC: What or who would you say have been the major influences upon you as a writer?

JPL: In 1977 or 1978 I decided I was going to try my hand at writing children's poems. They were embarrassingly bad, though I didn't realize it. I was carried away by enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is necessary, of course, but it won't get you there by itself. You really have to know the craft. So I stopped writing for about two or three years and immersed myself in poetry by both adult and children's poets. I read all the classics by poets like Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and T. S. Eliot. The most influential children's poets for me have been Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. In fact, I will soon have a book coming out that is an homage in verse to Edward Lear. I fell in love with Lear's work and read everything by and about him that I could get my hands on. I still really admire everything he did.

VC: How did your publishing career begin?

JPL: My publishing career actually began in an odd way. I traveled with my wife and three children to Cumberland Falls, Kentucky, to see a natural phenomenon called the moonbow. It is a white rainbow that occurs at only two places in the world, there and in Africa. You have to be there at just the right time to see it, and the climate has to be just right. It was a magnificent sight. After I saw it, I came home and wrote this story called *The Moonbow of Mr. B. Bones.* It had been accepted for publication by a publisher in California in 1980. At that time I figured as a writer I was off and running. The book was in production for about three years when the publisher reneged on the contract. That was a major setback. In a way it was good, I suppose, because it told me that things just aren't as easy as they seemed when the story first got accepted. The silver lining in the cloud is that this book became my fifth book, and *School Library Journal* named it one of the Best Books for 1992.

At the same time I was working on that book I was writing poems and being told by editors that I might as well forget it as a poet. Many editors gave me the impression that a new, unpublished poet couldn't break into the market, that it would be impossible for me to get published. There were times when I almost gave up, but I persevered. The best thing happened to me in 1983. I sent a batch of poems to Myra Cohn Livingston. She was one of the very few people who wrote back. She said she saw potential and told me to keep working. Two weeks later she called me and said she was putting together a collection of Christmas poems; she asked if I had any poems about Christmas. I was shaking as I talked with her. I told her I didn't have anything on that subject. She said, "Can you write some?" I asked her how soon she needed them. She said, "Yesterday." I said, "Fine." So I sat right down and wrote poems about Christmas, and she published my work in her book. Myra has been a wonderful friend, critic, and supporter, and I love her dearly. Through the years my poetry has been published in about fifteen of her anthologies. I can't tell you how much Myra has helped me, and dozens of other writers as well.

VC: Tell us about how you work as a writer. How would you describe your process of composing?

JPL: As William James used to say, "Habit is the great flywheel of society." I am a creature of habit. I schedule the classes I teach in the morning so that I can come home and write in the afternoon. For the last few years I have got into that routine, and I like it. It suits me. My books have been selling well enough that I'm able this year for the first time to take off a whole semester. From now on if I can continue to put food on my table through my writing, I'm going to teach six months a year and be off six months to write.

VC: Could you illustrate your work as a writer by telling us about the writing of a specific poem?

JPL: The one poem of mine that seems to be anthologized more than all the rest is the poem about how to tell whether a camel is a dromedary or a bactrian. The poem is titled "How to Tell a Camel," and it appears in *A Hippopotamusn't and Other Animal Verses* (1990). The bactrian has two humps, and the dromedary has one. Well, one day my twin brother and I were talking and he said, "The dromedary has one hump and the bactrian has two humps. Couldn't you do something in a poem with the two humps in the letter *B* and the one hump in the letter *D*?" I thought and thought about that. I wrote the poem, and in the last two lines I turned the letters over to show the shapes of the different humps, like this:

How to Tell a Camel

The **D**romedary has one hump,

The **B**actrian has two.

It's easy to forget this rule,
So here is what to do.
Roll the first initial over
On its flat behind:

The ᗰ actrian is different from

The ⌓ romedary kind.

(© 1990 by J. Patrick Lewis)

I think it's published a lot because it is "educational." Not that I intended it to be educational. My brother always jokes that he should be getting royalties from the poem because it was his idea.

There are times when Myra Cohn Livingston or Lee Bennett Hopkins or Paul Janeczko will write to say they are putting together collections and need poems for them. If I'm asked to do a poem for something specific, then I spend time thinking about it. Eventually, a poem evolves. Generally, when I do my own work, I think of poems for an entire collection and think along the lines of a particular theme. My first three poetry books have been animal books. Now I'm just finishing a collection of poems about sports. I thought about that broad subject area and put together an outline of what sports I wanted to include. Then I started searching to find the right forms to fit the sports or particular poems. Some needed to be in free verse, and some needed strict form and meter. I tend to write more often in strict form than in free verse. I also strive to match the correct tone for each poem, whether it should be funny or serious. This is how I work as a writer.

VC: Where do you prefer to do your writing?

JPL: I never work at school because there are too many distractions. I have a little study in my house. It is a room without much of a view. It is more functional than elegant. I'm surrounded by books and stacks of umpteen versions of umpteen poems, which I usually can't find when I want them. There was a time when I wrote longhand on yellow legal pads and swore I'd never use a word processor, but now I can't imagine going back to the legal pads. A computer is so writer-friendly. For me, there is just something about being able to juggle words around and printing a poem right away.

VC: A hallmark of your poetry is surprising, unexpected imagery. This is seen in a collection like *A Hippopotamusn't*. For example, in "A Tomcat Is," the cat has a "sandpaper tongue." In "Dragonflyer," the dragonfly's wings "teeter-totter." What is it about J. Patrick Lewis that leads to these incredible images?

JPL: I wish I could say that the muse comes to sit on my shoulder and whispers wonderful things in my ear. That doesn't happen. These images come with somewhat more perspiration than inspiration. It's a lonely—and I'm not singing a song of pity here—and time-consuming process. In many ways this is a lonely business. When I was trying to write these animal poems, I spent an awful lot of time doing research. For example, the more I researched hummingbirds, the more the helicopter wings of the hummingbird reminded me of hemlock petals falling and spinning around as they fell to the ground. Many of my images grow directly from my research.

I can tell you in many cases that what you see on the printed page was the fifth, tenth, or twenty-fifth version of a poem. I sometimes need that many drafts to get to what I want to say. I'll give an example. My mother's favorite poem of mine is "A Tomcat Is," which is the first poem in *A Hippopotamusn't*. When I wrote that poem she thought I had described cats perfectly, but after I finished it I also sent it to John Ciardi. He was one of our great children's poets. I asked him what he thought of the poem. He read it and said, "I love it, except you have a cat with a handlebar mustache. Have you ever seen a cat with a handlebar mustache?" I had to confess that I never had. He suggested I change it, and I did. I changed it to a buttermilk mustache, which also struck me for its description and internal rhyme. That is the working and reworking over and over again, which sometimes happens. It also points out the importance of researching your topic—*and* close observation! At other times, editors will pick up on those things. In any event, most of the images come from simple, hard work.

VC: Wordplay is also a big part of your poetry. In "Tom Tigercat" the cat wouldn't think of "lion" about anything. In "Tut-U-Tut-Tut" the bird is called a "woodpoker" (both from *A Hippopotamusn't*). This wordplay adds greatly to the humor found in your poetry.

JPL: I love wordplay, but I have to remind myself not to get too cerebral. I do tend to get a little carried away at times, and my humor sometimes moves too far away from children into the adult world. I'm also overly fond of puns, which I have to stifle. These are things I'm learning over the years, as I develop as a poet. I really do think the poems I write today, especially in terms of wordplay, are much better than my earlier efforts. It has been a process of writing, rewriting, keeping at it, and being willing to throw away stuff or file it so I can possibly come back to it later.

VC: Animals and objects of the natural world form the domain of your poetry. People are present, but they always seem on the edge of the experiences described.

JPL: As far as animals are concerned, that really is an odd thing, because I don't love animals. I'm fascinated by them, but I don't love them. I don't have a pet, nor do I think I will ever get one. When I was a kid I had a cat that seemed as big as a lion, but I never really cared for it all that much. I do love to watch animal documentaries. I also love to do research on animals and then write poems about them. I won't say it's easier to write poems about animals, but their behavior is so bizarre from our point of view that they lend themselves to poetry in a way that perhaps other subjects don't. I think that is really why I write about them so much, because their behaviors are so different. I love to go to zoos and I walk in parks a lot and I enjoy observing. I get most of my ideas from observation and experience. However, it very well may be that I will have exhausted my own storehouse of animal poems after my next books come out; they too will be about animals. I'll have to look for other subjects. That is one of the reasons I'm doing the collection of sports poems.

VC: In *Earth Verses and Water Rhymes* (1991) you have poems that describe everything from a golden seashore to a New England lighthouse to a Midwest field. How much do you travel to gather background information for your poems?

JPL: I traveled more in my younger days. Today I'm really something of a homebody, but I still do get around. I especially like going to Russia and have visited there many times. In *Earth Verses* I decided I wanted to do a collection of nature poems. It took me quite a while, because I wanted to think of themes that I thought were fitting. Once I had the themes, it was a question again of sitting down and thinking about the appropriate forms the poems should take. It is easy to suppose that these poems were based upon detailed observation, from lots of travel, but it "just ain't so"—at least not completely. With me it is always a combination of travel and the research. The research is such a large part of what I do.

VC: You mentioned how much you enjoy going to Russia. Your readers will notice that the dedication in *Earth Verses and Water Rhymes* is in Russian. Please provide us with a translation and tell us why the dedication is written in this language.

JPL: My interest in Russia began twenty years ago when I was working on my dissertation. I was chosen as an International Research and Exchange Fellow. As a part of that program, my wife and I and our three children went to Moscow to live for a year while I finished the dissertation. It was both a fascinating and difficult experience. We were the first family to be invited to take part in this cultural exchange program with what was then called the Soviet Union. Since then I've been back five times. I was there during the abortive 1991 coup. I spent three days on the barricades. Then I came back and wrote about my experiences for our newspapers. My dearest friends in all the world, apart from my family, live in Russia. That's the connection and why that dedication appears in *Earth Verses.* A translation would be, "with love and friendship." It is for my friends there.

VC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

JPL: I don't distinguish my poetry from any other poetry in that regard. To me, all poetry ought to be introduced to children at a very early age. It's too bad, but for some people who work with the young, their own experiences with poetry were not the happiest, so they tend to shy away from it or treat it as a demented stepchild or a distant cousin we bring in much later. It seems like prose always comes first. For this reason I feel poetry should be introduced in bulk. Not just my poetry, but anybody's. Tons of poetry. I think poetry is primary to the language, in a way that prose isn't. My feeling is that it ought to be central to the language and it ought to be so at the very earliest opportunity. Sometimes when you tell people you are studying poetry, their eyes glaze over. They think, "Oh my goodness, such an exalted subject!" That's too bad. Even when children don't understand part of a poem, it's the sound of the words that is most important at the early ages. I wish my own experience had been like that.

VC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

JPL: I have a retold Russian folktale and a Christmas story, set in England, coming out in the fall of 1994. I also have nine books of poems in various stages of production. One will be called *The Fat-Cats at Sea* (1994), and another is a book of animal poems called *Ridicholas Nicholas* (1995). I also have a softer book of poems coming out next, in spring 1994, called *July Is a Mad Mosquito;* it is a book of "month" poems. The homage to Edward Lear will also be out in 1995, as will *Riddle-icious*, my book of riddle poems.

VC: What suggestions do you have for young writers interested in writing poetry?

JPL: I would say first and foremost, never write more than you read. This was advice given centuries ago by the great writer Samuel Johnson, and I always take it to heart. Second, don't be afraid to fail, because that is essential to success. Failure is one of the great certainties of writing. It seems if you go into it knowing failure is possible, then you won't be surprised when it happens. You don't have to show people your failures. It's just a piece of paper and you can throw it away. Another thing is to turn the TV set off once in a while. I sometimes despair when I think about the prospects for literature, and poetry in particular, because it is up against a very formidable medium in television. I'd like to think that at some point we'll be able to overcome that influence. Everybody criticizes TV, and in many cases the criticism is well deserved, but never more so than when it detracts—and distracts—from the printed word.

VC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

JPL: Keep reading and sharing poetry. I also want to say how much I appreciate the letters from my readers. I didn't anticipate getting so many letters from kids. Usually I get a cover letter from a teacher and thirty letters from a class. Some of these letters are so charming. I'm always touched by them. When you get that kind of feedback from your readers, it is just the greatest thing in the world.

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Marilyn Singer

To Marilyn Singer the world is a magical place, and her poetry embraces this feeling. Whether the subject is the cycle of the seasons, as in Turtle in July *(1989), or the events of a three-thousand-mile camping trip, as in* In My Tent *(1992), her poems reflect the joy and wonder of childhood experience. She advises young readers, "Everything we learn, everything we become interested in will help us find the world to be more fascinating and exciting." This is a philosophy carried forth in her own life, which includes interests in such diverse areas as yoga, meditation, caring for pets, and baseball.*

Singer's poetry is characterized by tightly focused images that blossom into rich narratives, inviting the reader to travel along. She believes that this ability to create stories and weave detail actually began when she was a small child and listened to her grandmother tell "amazing" stories of growing up in Rumania. Hearing those stories helped foster a love for language that led to her writing career.

Singer also grew up in a household where music was an important part of everyday life. Her mother and father loved to sing, and going to theaters to see musical comedies became a favorite family activity. Even today, when faced with "writer's block," Singer will rise from her writing table and sing from favorite musicals until she feels ready to move back to the story or poem at hand. This love for music has influenced the musicality of her poems, which sing through a blend of alliteration and onomatopoeia.

Marilyn Singer lives today in Brooklyn, New York.

Photo: Anthony Noel

JC: Please tell us about your early life and development as a writer.

MS: I lived in the Bronx until I was four and a half, right next to Yankee Stadium, but during my entire childhood I never went to a single game there. At that time this part of the South Bronx was a very lively area. Our home was near a main street called the Grand Concourse. My parents and I used to walk along it and go to all kinds of places. I especially remember trips to downtown New York City. That was a huge treat for me. I also remember all the local stores had these incredible smells, like the smells of pickles in barrels and freshly ground coffee. I can still smell all those places today. When my sister was born we moved to Long

Island. It was nice to have more space, but I think my heart was and will always be in the city.

When I was a kid I went to the movies as often as possible. Back then we went to some grandiose theaters that had lush red or blue velvet curtains and little cherubs all over the walls. I really loved seeing musical comedies. Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin movies were also favorites. As a matter of fact, I liked any movie that made me laugh. I hated tearjerkers, westerns, and war movies. After seeing movies like those, I usually ended up being sad or terrified. I think that going to the movies played a major role in my growing up, partly because of the music in the films and partly because I learned to enjoy and appreciate a good story.

Music was always an important part of my life. My father used to sing to me all the time. He'd bring home song sheets called "The Hit Parade," or something like that. On these sheets, which would alternately be printed on pale orange, pale blue, or pale green paper, would be the lyrics of all the popular songs of the day. At night my dad would sing these songs to me. My mother also sang all the time, especially when she was doing the dishes or other household chores. So, I grew up knowing lots and lots of songs and song lyrics. I was also a pretty good singer and was often called upon to perform for relatives. At that time, Cole Porter and Ira Gershwin were still writing, so some really good music was being composed. I think studying the lyrics of these songs made me more conscious of language use and really influenced how I developed as a poet.

JC: Do you remember when you decided that you wanted to become a writer?

MS: I can't really point to one particular event, but there were several people who influenced me greatly to become a writer. My mom read to me all the time, so I developed a love of books at an early age. Then there was my grandmother. Some of my fondest memories of childhood involve time spent with her. She and I shared a room together until I was twelve. Every night she told me incredible stories, stories which I am sure also influenced my later writings. She was so good at creating description. Grandma was from Rumania and would describe places she knew there in such detail I could see and smell every aspect of them. Some of the stories she told were fables and morality tales. I remember stories like the one about a woman who left her husband because he was so mean to her. He wanted her to come back home, but she first made him chop down a tree that was in their yard. After the tree was cut, she told the husband to examine it closely. He saw that the tree was hollow. The wife then said, "Yes it is, just like your heart." There is no question I got some of my ability to create and weave detail from listening to my grandmother tell these stories.

Another person who provided great influence was our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Fell. She was a wonderful person who was like an aunt to me. I remember having trouble sleeping and telling her about this. She told me that each night before I went to sleep, I should make up a story that would carry me off to dreamland. No one had actually said that to me before. My grandmother had told me stories, but she didn't suggest that I make up my own. I thought Mrs. Fell's idea was tremendous, and I started to do just that. Each night before I went to sleep I'd make up all sorts of adventure and fantasy tales. Looking back, this was probably the real spark that led to my development as a writer. I remember I would go into the bathroom with a flashlight and shine the light on the ceiling. I would pretend the light was coming from Lightey the Lightning Bug. I would even have complete conversations with Lightey. My parents overheard me one night and thought it was cute that I had an imaginary friend. I knew I wasn't making up imaginary friends; I was making up stories and having a great time doing it! As time went by I had a whole cast of insect characters for my stories. However, I didn't write down any of these stories until much later. They were the first children's stories I actually put on paper. I thank my mom, my grandma, and Mrs. Fell for those and other stories.

JC: What was your first writing to be published for young readers?

MS: The first book I had published was *The Dog Who Insisted He Wasn't* (1976). I wrote that after I had quit teaching. I loved working with kids, but the politics of teaching and all the structure found within the school setting really started to bother me. I just felt I needed more freedom, but I wasn't sure what I was going to do next. At that time my husband was working at the American Federation of Arts. Through contacts at work he was able to get me some jobs writing about film and preparing teachers' guides and catalogs. One day I was sitting in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, a place where I spend a lot of time, and I started thinking about writing down my insect stories. My husband, Steve, gave me great encouragement, so I got to work. When I finished putting them together, I sent them to a few publishers. The editors wrote back encouraging letters, but none wanted to publish my stories. I decided I needed to work on my writing more, so I joined a writer's workshop at Bank Street Community College. I read the insect stories to the others in the workshop and got some good criticism. I kept writing and finally wrote *The Dog Who Insisted He Wasn't.* I next got a list of publishers and editors and sent out the manuscript. Within six months, Ann Durrell at Dutton accepted the story. I remember getting this letter that said they were publishing my book, and I said to myself, "What? You mean I'm going to be a children's writer?" It was all so amazing and wonderful to me.

JC: Today your hobbies and interests include Taoist medicine and exercise, yoga, meditation, Chinese herbology, and baseball. How would you say these have influenced your work as a writer?

MS: First of all, writing itself is a form of meditation. I write and meditate, among other things, to try to keep myself sane in this world—to center myself. Through writing and meditation I am able to get calmer and to open up to myself. I guess you could say one helps the other. Also, for a long time I have been attracted to things from Asia. I took up Japanese flower arranging, which is called Ikebana. It teaches one about balance and harmony through arrangement of objects. This actually helped me write one of my novels, *Several Kinds of Silence* (1988). Another reason I took to it was I'd not done any real study of the visual arts and felt like a whole side of my brain had not been used enough or properly. I also think the arranging has helped me become more aware of shape and order in my poetry.

Meditation, yoga, Ikebana, and Taoism all deal with viewing your place in and becoming harmonious with nature. That is something attractive to me because I spend so much time sitting and observing natural things like plants, birds, and other animals. All these practices have helped me focus my attention even more on nature and then write about it with love and, I hope, insight.

My interest in baseball is another story. I *love* baseball—or at least I did until the Mets got so bad. I recently finished writing a poem which I don't think I could have written if I weren't such a fan. It is called "High Fly."

"Are you good at this game?" Carrie accuses
"Sure," I lie
    standing there in right field
    holding up my brand new glove
        smooth as butterscotch
        and stiff as an old dog's leg
    praying nobody hits one out to me
And nobody does
    until

bottom of the ninth bases loaded two away
we're ahead by one
and uh oh (would you believe)
    here it comes
"Dare you not to drop it," Carrie teases
Sun-blind I reach
    reach
and thump (would you believe)
    here it is
in the tiptop of my glove
    a snowcone surprise
Then just like in a really good dream
there's the cheering
    and the hugging
    and the squeals
And best of all there's Carrie
with her startled eyes
    and only her mouth catching flies

(© 1994 by Marilyn Singer)

I had so much fun writing that. It will appear in a new collection of poems called *Family Reunion* (1994).

I guess you could say that all of these areas have influenced my writing in one way or another. Everything I've done or liked has influenced my writing. That is why I feel it is important that younger children get out and experience as much of the world as they can. Everything we learn, everything we become interested in will help us find the world to be more fascinating and exciting, and, if you want to write, you need to be interested and enthusiastic about the world.

JC: How do you work as a writer? Any special habits or customs?

MS: I write everything out by hand on yellow legal pads. I print everything because my handwriting is so abysmal. I have learned to print very quickly, so this doesn't slow me down as ideas come pouring out. When I write I always use a Flair pen. Always. Writing by hand is great because I can go anywhere and get right to work; I'm not chained to a typewriter or computer in an office. I have written virtually everywhere: on the subway, on a plane, in a coffee shop, in parks. When I finish composing on the legal pads, I go home and type everything into the word processor.

Another thing I do while I work may seem a little different to some people. While I'm typing the material into the word processor I like to listen to records, usually of musicals. When I get tired or bored I start singing. I will actually get up and perform a number. To break the monotony of writing I'll also talk to my dogs and cats and say something like, "This really stinks. What do you think?" I remember when I was writing *Turtle in July* my black cat, Ebony, was curled up next to me. I said to her, "I've got to write a cat poem, Ebony. What should I say?" She started purring and snuggled closer. I looked at her and realized how warm she liked to be, and the lines of the poem started to come: "I prefer warm fur/ The perfect fire to lie beside." I really need these short breaks, whether they be singing or talking to my pets. Then, I'm ready to start back up again!

JC: I understand that you and your husband once went on a three-thousand-mile camping trip. Did that particular adventure provide the spark for *In My Tent*?

MS: That camping trip was wonderful. I was still teaching at the time. The minute school let out for summer vacation Steve picked me up. The car was packed with all of our gear and two of our pets, a dog and a pigeon. We drove straight west and saw everything from Niagara Falls to the Badlands to the Grand Canyon. They were all such incredible places, so beautiful. I knew I had to do something with that trip, and the experiences from it and several other shorter trips provided the basis for *In My Tent*.

JC: One of the hallmarks of your poetry is skilled use of repetition. In *Turtle in July*, words and phrases are repeated to add a beautiful rhythmic quality to the lines. At the same time, this repetition also mimics the sounds and movements of the animals being described. For example, when chanted slowly, the "and chew, and chew" sounds like the mooing of the cow in the poem "Cow," and the repetition of "sweep" in "Barn Owl" reflects the smooth and silent movements of this majestic bird.

MS: In *Turtle in July* I wanted to use words, repetition, and syntax to mimic the sounds I thought animals would make and at the same time to say something about their behavior. In other words, I wanted to write what these animals would say or sound like if they spoke English. I intentionally used a lot of "oo" sounds in "Cow" to create the mooing of the cow's voice. In "Barn Owl" I used "sweep" and other words to show silent hunting and flight. Then I shocked the reader with "swoop, snatch, crack"—also representative of the bird's actions and point of view. So, repetition is a key, but so is the startling single word or image. I had a great time playing with the language while writing these poems.

An interesting sidelight to *Turtle in July* is that it didn't start out to be a collection of poems. It started as a story about a boy and his grandmother walking around a park and looking at animals. The story began: "It was a very hot day and Matthew felt grumpy. To cheer him up his grandmother took him to the park. They walked around the lake. 'Ugh. I'm boiling,' said Matthew. 'I wish I were that turtle.' 'What turtle?' replied the grandmother. Matthew said, 'That one over there with just his head sticking out of the water. That is what I'd like to be—a turtle in July.'"

The story continued with them walking around the lake and talking about which animals they'd like to be in different months of the year. I read the story to Steve and he said, "That's BORING." It *was* boring, but I liked the idea of a different animal for each month. One day, while I was visiting the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, an inspiration came to me. I decided to write the story as a series of poems in the voices of the animals. I started working as soon as I got home. In order to get the sounds of the animals and the rhythmic quality blended together, I had to play with the words a lot until I felt I had combinations that were just right. For example, in the "Deer Mouse" poem I didn't repeat the "get get get" at first to represent the nervous, jerky motions of the mouse. At first I used "bop bop bop," but I could see that combination didn't add enough of the nervous quality I was seeking. I felt that "get get get" was a much better choice because it represented both the actions and feelings of the mouse.

JC: In your poetry we also find a very balanced combination of alliteration and onomatopoeia. In a poem like "Timber Rattlesnake" (from *Turtle in July*), repetition of harsh sibilant sounds ("s") creates the atmosphere and tone of the poem, while onomatopoetic words like "strike" and "shuffling" reflect the actions of the snake. What is it about you that leads to such a balance of sound in your poetry?

MS: Alliteration is one of my favorite poetic devices, and I'm very cognizant of its power when I write. In "Timber Rattlesnake" the repetition of the "s" sound was very conscious on my part. When I think of a venomous snake, I think of that "ssssss." I kept playing with word combinations and word order until the alliteration fit with the onomatopoetic quality of other words. These are all things I work on at the same time.

I am always interested in the musicality of a line. First and foremost, a line has to sound right to my ear. When I go out to share my poetry with groups, this is the first thing I mention. The lines have to flow. I will work and rework a line or a whole poem, no matter how long it takes, until I like the sound of everything working together in that poem. At the same time I'm doing that, I'm looking for images that are fresh and different, images that will startle the reader or make the reader smile. I don't want to retread old images or put something in just for the sake of startling the reader. My images must make sense in the larger context of the poem. I remember when I was working on *In My Tent* I wanted an image about what this tent looked like. I knew it was orange, and I started playing with images like "a big glob of marmalade sitting on top of toast." That was an interesting image, and I'm sure it would have startled some readers, but it just didn't work for me. It was really stretching it to try to make it fit into the overall context of what I was creating. In plain English: It stuck out like a sore thumb! I kept playing with word combinations until I hit upon the image of "an oriole landing in the emerald woods" (from "Dad Says My Tent Is Rugged"). This image was much more in keeping with the natural setting and the whole experience of camping.

JC: Another characteristic of your poetry is the short, compact line. While most of your poems do have a narrative structure, the poems are not long on narrative details. Rather, you rely upon tightly focused images to give power to the lines. For example, in the poem "Turtle In July" the oppressive temperature is described as "heavy hot hangs." What is your philosophy related to this word economy?

MS: I think this grows directly from my interest in Asian art and poetry, and in particular from my study of haiku. I admire the word economy and expressive images found within something as focused as haiku. The writer of haiku can use just a minimum of words, and these words must be able to carry the strongest type of imagery. The more I read haiku, the more this is impressed upon me—and the more this has shown up in my own poetry.

At the same time, I am the type of person who gets bored easily by lots of description, especially if I feel the description is unnecessary. I get tired of a piece quickly if I feel the writer is just running off at the mouth. It is bad enough in prose, but I especially don't like lengthy descriptions in poetry. My philosophy here is simple: If the right words are chosen, the same powerful images can be created just as well with three or four words as they can be in a hundred. For me, a poem is really capturing a moment in time. Thought of in this way, a poem is like a photograph. So, what I try to do is write the visual equivalent of a photograph.

JC: One evolution in your writing that can be seen in *In My Tent* is the addition of very striking, at times very unusual, similes that reflect how young children view the world. This can be seen when the youngster pulls down his cap "like a flag at a race" in the poem "Packing the Car We Play." This use of simile isn't as pronounced in your earlier work.

MS: In the past I made greater use of simile in the poetry I wrote for the adult audience. Only recently have I begun to rely more upon it to build description in my poetry for children. I really started noticing this when I was working on my book *Nine O'Clock Lullaby* (1991). It is a lyrical trip through the different time zones of the world. To me, the book is really a collection of very small poems. Anyway, the book begins when it is 9:00 A.M. in Brooklyn, and the reader is taken from there on a trip around the world. On the way to Goat City I used the simile, "Auntie peddles quickly, flying like a dragon." I also have, "Elder sister peddles slowly, flapping like a goose." At 6:00 P.M. in Los Angeles, the sun eases down "like a golden dinner plate." There is no way to miss the simile in this book. When used well, simile opens up new ways of thinking about our everyday lives. When it is used poorly, it becomes a tired cliché. This is something I always think about as I write.

JC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

MS: First of all, it has to be read aloud, both by teachers and children. Everyone has to be able to hear what a poem is doing. I also think it would be very good, since so many of my poems deal with nature, if children could be taken to natural places or see films about nature to help them feel the interconnectedness of everything around us. It would be great to take children to a park so they could watch birds and their activities for a while. Then the children could talk about what emotions were stirred up in them while they watched the birds. Following this, they could read poems about birds. What I am saying is this: I believe poetry should be coupled with observation and experience whenever possible.

JC: What suggestions do you have for young people interested in writing poetry?

MS: First, I would tell them to learn how to observe, to explore the world. Everything you observe might someday be the subject of a poem. I would also tell them to read. And not just my poetry, but *all* poetry. Also, listening to music might help them get that musical feeling in themselves. You really do have to feel the rhythm yourself before you can duplicate it on the page.

I also tell youngsters not to be afraid of rewriting. Many kids get discouraged because they write something and it is not perfect on the first try. Well, what I write isn't perfect the first time either. There is no shame at all in rewriting and reworking the words until they sound just right to you. This is what should take place. There is also no shame in accepting useful criticism. This criticism can help us grow as writers in so many ways. My husband is always my first critic—and he's a good one. I have been given a lot of useful advice from editors. I respect them tremendously because they have such a difficult and delicate job.

JC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

MS: I write a lot of things besides poetry. Currently, I'm working on a novel. But in terms of my poetry, I recently finished a collection of poems called *The Morgans Dream* (1994). In it are represented the dreams that different members of a single family have on the same night. To match the subject matter, the poems are written in a very dreamlike manner. Because I was representing the dreams of different individuals, I tried to have in each poem not only different content but different language as well. To give you an idea of what these poems are like, this is one called "Catherine's Dream."

> The words
>   all mumbly jumbly
> are not her own
> No matter how hard she tries
>   she talks in
>   twisted biscuits
>   and fumphfarumphfary
> Jimmy, Johnny
>   Patsy, Pauline
>   the whole class
>   whinny and wicker
>   like tickled horses
> The underwear
>   all purple and yellow
> is not her own
> She can't imagine why
>   she's wearing it
>   with orange galoshes
>   and fluffy wuffy furbelows

Lizzie, Linda
Brian, Bob
the whole class
hoot and halloo
like crazy chimpanzees
The dream
all dummy crummy
is not her own
Though she wouldn't believe it
if you told her
dreamers everywhere squirm
in the same tongue-tied misery
before a howdy rowdy crowd
Except their underwear is always
different

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I've also completed a book of silly poems about pets called *Please Don't Squeeze Your Boa, Noah!* (1995). My most recent published collection of poems is called *It's Hard to Read a Map with a Beagle on Your Lap* (1993). It is a collection of funny dog poems. I just love writing silly stuff. I also finished two other collections: *Family Reunion*, described by its title, and *Sky Words* (1994), which is poems about the sky. Like clouds, the forms of all the poems there are very different. Some of them are more like episodes. Some are just goofy images I wanted to put into a poem.

I have a wide range of things I write about, and I hope I have a wide range in my poetry as well. I get bored easily, so I try to challenge myself by trying different things in both prose and poetry. However, my favorite thing to write is poetry. It's hard to explain, but there is just some magical quality to poetry that excites me. My brain feels really different and I'm much more relaxed when I'm working on poetry. To me, poetry seems closer to that central place everybody is looking for in meditation.

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

MS: Look at the world and try to see the interconnectedness of everything. Learn to respect and get along with animals, plants, and other people. No living thing is expendable. Everything has a place in the world, and all of us should think about this more often. Learn as much as you can about all the different things that are around us. The world is a magical place.

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Cynthia Rylant

While Cynthia Rylant was growing up, she had no inkling she would one day become a writer. The major goals of her life were to get married, settle down near where she grew up in Shady Spring, West Virginia, and raise a family. It wasn't until she enrolled in a college English class that she fell in love with literature and "the beauty of the language." Since that time, Rylant has become one of the more popular and critically acclaimed writers of stories and poems for children and young adults. In 1993 her book Missing May *(1992) was granted the Newbery Medal.*

As a writer, Rylant is a creature of habit. Her first drafts are written in ink on yellow legal pads. She prefers to write in long, uninterrupted blocks of time and doesn't move to the typewriter until all is polished and ready to be sent off to the publisher. Writing short pieces doesn't especially interest her; she says, "I have always wanted to write only books."

Rylant's poetry captures the true spirit and flavor of small-town living. In both Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood *(1984) and* Soda Jerk *(1990), readers are introduced to this life through vivid characters who become flesh and blood on the page, a hallmark of Rylant's writing.*

Today, Cynthia Rylant lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Photo: Walker Evans

VC: Please tell us about your childhood.

CR: I grew up in southern West Virginia. My parents split up when I was four, and my mother went to nursing school and needed a place to leave me while she was away. As a result, I lived with my grandparents for much of my early childhood in a little town called Cool Ridge, West Virginia. Living there had a big influence on me. When my mother finished her schooling, I moved back with her and lived with her until I graduated from high school.

I was a very outgoing, very gregarious child. I liked everybody I met, so I spent a lot of time outside on my bike looking for somebody to hang out with. This was especially true when I lived with my mother. As a nurse she worked long hours, so I was on my own a good deal of the time. I filled up the time by going around the neighborhood and hanging out at other people's houses and finding kids to play with. I really wasn't much of a loner at all. I was simply independent and creative—I had to be—because I was stuck there in tiny Beaver, West Virginia, where I lived with my mother. Because she worked so much, I didn't have anyone to drive me anywhere. I couldn't go swimming, and I couldn't play any kind of sport. Beaver was just a little town in the middle of some very big mountains. It had a drugstore and post office, and that was just about it. To me, it didn't really seem like a town; it was just a bunch of houses sitting together.

VC: As you grew up, what subjects did you most enjoy in school?

CR: When I was in high school I was good in English classes, but my main interests weren't academic. I was intent on marrying my high school boyfriend, so I didn't pursue any dreams of attending college. Also, this was still rural Appalachia where not many kids, and especially girls, were strongly encouraged to go off to college. I really didn't have anybody giving me advice about what I should do with my life. I was a very good student and a fairly good writer already, but I was very confused about career possibilities. In high school I won several awards for my work in English classes, but I really couldn't see myself as a fiction writer—or any kind of writer for that matter—because to me writers were people who were born into loftier circumstances than I. I just always assumed that writers came from upper-middle-class families and from so-called better parts of the country.

My big dream was to marry my boyfriend the minute we graduated, move into a house trailer, find some kind of work, and pretty much take care of him for the rest of my life. However, the big dream was shattered when we broke up a couple of months before graduation. There I was. I had to look for something else to do with my life. Having no other ideas, I just decided to go to college. I thought about becoming a nurse like my mother because I didn't really know what else I could be. I had no other role models to follow. I enrolled in a nursing program, and in my first semester I was required to take freshman English. It was in that English class that I fell in love with literature. I immediately switched my major because I wanted to read more books. I went through college as an English major and had plans of eventually becoming an English teacher.

VC: What was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

CR: I never planned on being a writer. I never took creative writing classes, and I never was one of those people who published in student literary magazines. I was just too intimidated by the whole idea of becoming a writer. I didn't feel that was something open to me. In retrospect, I can say taking those literature classes gave me a true love of the beauty of the language, and through the literature I learned to know what was beautiful and what wasn't in writing. As far as the craft of writing, nobody ever taught me in any way. I didn't have any kind of formal training.

VC: Who would you say most influenced you as you developed as a poet? Were there specific writers you studied and enjoyed?

CR: The poetry classes I took in college tended to focus more on the poetry of the nineteenth century, so I still didn't realize a person could be a poet and write stories in poetry about ordinary life. In these classes I was reading the poems of writers like Coleridge and Wordsworth, but they didn't move me. While I was still a student, some poet came to the campus to read his poetry and give a talk. Now, I didn't go see him, because I wasn't into things like that, but the bookstore happened to have some of his books. They were set up on an easel, and I happened to see them as I was browsing one day. I don't know what made me pick up one of those books, but I did. I read one or two poems and went over to the counter and plunked down some money because I wanted to read the rest of the collection. The poems were so good. The book was called *Paper Boy,* and it was written by David Huddle, a writer who lived in Vermont. The poems were in the voice of an adolescent boy living in rural Appalachia. As the title implies, this boy was a paper carrier, and the poems described his experiences in life. I didn't know that poets wrote books about such things. I think if I hadn't read *Paper Boy* I wouldn't have written *Waiting to Waltz* and *Soda Jerk.*

Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of poetic heroes. I'm still not that familiar with that many poets. It's really hard to find good poetry. That's why I feel anthologies are so important for students. The best poets in the world are still publishing with small presses, which bookstores don't carry. You also can't find their books in the library. My favorite poems have usually been those sent to me by friends. A person really has to dig to find good poetry, and it's hard to find the time to do that. I'm sure many young readers feel the same way.

VC: Tell us about your early writing experiences.

CR: I remember in high school we had to write many essays for our English classes. I wrote one particular essay about wearing my first bra. The English teachers just thought it was a riot. They passed it around and everyone read it, which was mortifying to me. They saw the writer in me, but nobody ever said, "Have you ever thought about becoming a writer?" I think even those folks didn't imagine anybody from Shady Spring High School in Shady Spring, West Virginia, could actually make a living as a writer, so it was never encouraged.

I've never wanted to write poetry for small presses, magazines, newspapers, or anything like that. I have always wanted to write only books. So, I didn't write poetry until I knew I could write a *book* of poetry. I wrote *Waiting to Waltz* pretty early in my career, so I wasn't sure it would be accepted. I wrote it in a couple of days in a flurry of inspiration. I saw it as a "whole." Poems didn't trickle out one at a time over a period of three or four years; I simply sat down and wrote the book in a couple of mornings. Everything just flowed together.

VC: Tell us about your own process of composing.

CR: I never use machines. You'll never see me sitting at a typewriter or writing on a word processor while I'm composing—even though everyone keeps telling me to buy a word processor because it will save me so much time, etc. When I first started writing, I wrote with an ink pen on yellow legal pads because it was cheap. I didn't have the money to buy expensive equipment. Plus, when I started writing I had a newborn baby. I needed to be able to write in any room of the house, at any time. I could always tuck that yellow legal pad under my arm and go somewhere to write. I have never changed from that method. When I'm ready to write, I wait for this feeling that tells me there is a story inside me. Then I pick up the yellow pad and I'll go sit on the porch, or sometimes I'll just sit up in bed late at night. However, I like to write outside if I can manage it.

I don't get to the typewriter until everything is finished in longhand and polished. The only reason I use a typewriter is so I can send it in to the publisher. So I don't ever have a typewriter sitting on my desk in my house. It's in the closet, and I only pull it out at the last minute. I find it sad that everybody is doing their work on machines because the more people use word processors the less we'll have these wonderful handwritten manuscripts to look at in the archives. In the future we won't be able to see their handwriting, thoughts, and doodles; we'll lose a personal side to writing.

VC: In *Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood* there are several poems that are "dark" in tone (the tale of the drunk in "The Brain Surgeon," the father dying in "Forgotten"), but the overriding tone holding all together here might best be described as one of quiet dignity. All characters, from the man seen in "Sam the Shoe Shop Man" to the mother in "PTA," are strong characters—people whose lives are hard but who are proud of who and what they are. This quiet dignity is a common thread running through all of your work.

CR: I think all of this was pretty inevitable given the place where I was raised. I mean, if there are any two words that describe the people who built and sustained Appalachia, I would say the two words would be "quiet dignity." This comes through in my writing because this is what I saw all around me as I grew up.

VC: Related to this, a hallmark of your work as a poet is the creation of vivid characters, characters who become flesh and blood on the page. These characters are simple, yet complex. What is it about you that allows you to see so deeply within the souls of these characters and then create them on the page?

CR: I just think I was meant to be the type of writer I am. We all have some sort of mission in life, and I think writing is clearly mine. In my work, the doors have just flung open for me. I was published fairly quickly, and the stories and words have come so easily. I have also been blessed with good editors and good illustrators. Everything in my writing career has happened so smoothly and effortlessly that I can only imagine that this is part of the reason I am on this earth.

I do think that I was blessed with this gift of insight into the characters of people. As a child I spent a lot of time with adults and with all kinds of children. It wasn't a cloistered childhood where you only go to daycare and spend all day with the same age group and then come home and spend the evening with your two parents and brothers and sisters—and then the next day you do the same thing all over again. I always spent a lot of time with people, like the person in "Sam the Shoe Shop Man" in *Waiting to Waltz.* As a child I was even good friends with a truck driver who used to take me along on his day trips. I was with very interesting characters all my early life. In those days, people seemed much more relaxed about the presence of children than is the case today. We just weren't sent off into the next room or out into the yard. We were an accepted part of the conversation.

VC: In terms of style, your poetry is very conversational, very warm in tone. Do you suppose this is a result of all the conversations you had with those "interesting characters" as you were growing up?

CR: As a kid, I spent a lot of time around storytellers. I don't mean people who were professional storytellers; they were just people with some kind of yarn to spin, like the guys who sat telling tall tales on the porch in front of Ray's Bait Shop. I have always loved that voice. It is so brilliant and unpretentious. So I think that I am just echoing those voices that I heard in West Virginia, whether they be those in front of the bait shop or two sisters sitting at the kitchen table and talking about all the shenanigans in the coal camp. There was no hesitancy in any of these folks. They didn't have to wait and choose the right words. Their words just flowed. I have that in my head.

VC: Another characteristic of your work as a poet is that you present a full range of emotions through the lines: from hope to despair, from joy to fear. Through the poems, young readers see that the world is not always black or white, and although it may not seem like it at times, it is constantly changing—and that lives are constantly evolving.

CR: I'm not trying in my poetry to instruct about life in any way. But you are probably right about seeing in my work that inevitability that things are going to go wrong at times and things are going to be beautiful at other times. I think when you are a child, it's harder to see that. When you are young and things go wrong, it is really difficult to see any hope of being happy again. That is just life. I've lived life enough to know that once the bad passes, the sun really is going to come out again. The more you live, the more you can have faith in that. The problem is that kids haven't lived enough to have this proved to them enough times. However, that faith will come. Maybe they can see some of this in my poetry.

VC: In *Waiting to Waltz* you choose to use a first-person speaker for the poems. The reader discovers so much about the feelings of this speaker that when the last page is turned, it is like saying goodbye to an old friend.

CR: I think through a first-person voice you trust the poetry more because the speaker shows such vulnerability. The speakers—whether it's a girl in the *Waiting to Waltz* poems or the boy in *Soda Jerk*—are so vulnerable, and because their words are presented through the freedom of poetry, they can say whatever they want. They don't have to hide. I think a person really is so relieved when he meets a character or a voice who reveals all these weaknesses and feelings that he himself has. He finds someone he can relate to. I think first person works well because you feel like you are getting the real story. As a reader, you don't feel like somebody is crafting some sort of trick. Sometimes poems are so crafted that they just sort of leave you empty. I mean, all the words are pretty and it rhymes, but when you read it you just feel like somebody whittled at it for so long that all the heart was taken out of it. I think writing in first person prevents a writer from doing that.

VC: In *Soda Jerk* the look at small-town life is continued, this time in Cheston, Virginia. Here twenty-eight poems are seen through the eyes of the soda jerk who works at Maywell's Drugstore. Again—as was the case in *Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood*—one speaker is used to present the poems. Did you ever consider writing these poems from the point of view of each person described?

CR: You know, I feel like I really didn't have any choice. *Soda Jerk* came to me on a Sunday morning, and I sat down and wrote almost the whole book that day. After that first poem, the speaker just took off. He had a whole lot to say, so I just kept writing as those stories he had to tell would come into my head. So the collection wasn't really planned or anything. I do have a new collection coming out in the spring of 1994 in which I wrote the poems from the point of view of each person included. What I did was select thirty photographs taken by Walker Evans during the Depression years and wrote a poem to accompany each. The poems represent thirty different voices. But it wasn't difficult for me to take thirty different approaches. The photographs were so strong that stories just came right away. So, I guess you can say I have now made the leap to doing different voices in poetry.

VC: While the poems in *Soda Jerk* unfold through the eyes of one character, the thoughts and feelings presented are universal to all. The soda jerk watches the world around him and wonders if he'll ever really fit in, whether he will ever find true joy and purpose in life. All people eventually come to this thought, and through this universality, this collection speaks to all readers.

CR: I wrote about this character because I understood him so well. I didn't realize when I was a teenager that I was an artist of any kind, but I did have a poignant sense of being lost while still incredibly in love with life and fascinated by the people in my community. Those are all the ingredients of a poet. However, I never knew that at the time. I just thought I was a majorette. I also remember during those years having that incredible morality the soda jerk has. As we get older we get distracted with work, family, and other commitments—and as a result we tend to lose that sense of morality. I think we don't question things as often as we should.

There are also many parts of the soda jerk that are purely male that I think I knew only because my playmates while growing up were mostly boys. There just happened to be more boys than girls in that little town. I had only one girl playmate and about thirty boys. I used to play cops and robbers and other games of that sort, so I think I knew boys—how they talk. I've always felt comfortable using a male voice in my novels. This has just spilled over into my poetry.

VC: In *Soda Jerk* there are moments when the speaker is very uncertain of his place in life. For example, in "I have been wanting to be an actor" he says that he is terrified that he might be stuck in Cheston for the rest of his life. However, in the last poem in the collection the reader can see the true wisdom of the soda jerk; he is no jerk at all—both literally and figuratively. He has learned from all he has observed, and this wisdom will carry him forward in life. This collection could have ended in any number of ways, with the soda jerk presenting a very different view. Yet, here you chose the positive, the upbeat.

CR: My grandfather's abiding advice was, "Always do the best you can with what you have." I think that's what the soda jerk is determined to do. I don't know that he'll ever get out of that town. I would say probably not. But, his mind is still going to be as rich as it is and there will still be enough going on that it will keep him nourished and interested in life. He's an artist and a poet and he may never put anything down on paper, but he will live his life as a poet because of the way he views the world. I think kids who have this same sort of insight will always be okay. I think no matter what kind of situation they're thrown into or where they have to live or what circumstances surround them, their minds are always going to be so fulfilling that they will be fine. Some kids just have to turn inside themselves to create their own rewards. In many ways, this is what the soda jerk does. I think it's usually the people who don't have that "inside" life, those who depend upon external luck and circumstances, who find themselves ultimately very unhappy.

VC: You chose free verse as the form for the poems in both *Waiting to Waltz* and *Soda Jerk*. This form gave you more freedom, because you weren't locked into a particular rhyme scheme or metrical pattern, in describing the people and events captured in the lines. Through this freedom your descriptions are striking in their clarity and strength.

CR: I write my poetry in free verse because I can write what I need to say really fast—I can present ideas as quickly as possible. Each poem was written in a matter of seconds. That may sound difficult to believe, but it's true. When everything comes together for me, the words just flow. I didn't write a few words and then stare off into space and twiddle my pen while I waited for the rest of the poem to come to me. I would literally bang it out as quick as I could write it down. Thoughts and pen movements practically became the same act. I think this happens for me because writing in free verse is just like having somebody's conversational voice to use. This conversational voice, this free verse, makes the poems real.

VC: When you write, what interaction do you strive for between reader and print? How do you hope your readers respond to your writing?

CR: As a writer, I don't really think about my reader very much. I never have. I've just been lucky that what I write has a market. I simply decide to write something like a book of poetry about a sixteen-year-old soda jerk—and I do it. Pretty much, that's it.

I also haven't received many letters from adolescents who have read my books of poetry, so I don't know that much about how readers respond to my writing. However, I do remember once getting a batch of letters from some junior high kids who had just finished reading *Soda Jerk.* That was just thrilling for me. I think what I appreciated most were the boys' reactions. I wanted boys to tell me that I had captured what I wanted to say about the soda jerk, that it was authentic. And they did. I was surprised at how important that was for me to hear from them because when I write I'm not trying to please anybody.

As far as any type of response is concerned, I'd be happy if my poetry made people believe they too could write poetry. That would be great. I think many people feel they have to craft the poem and do all sorts of fancy things to it to make it work. Also, some feel that in order to write poetry they have to come from a big city, be an A-student, or go through all sorts of trials and tribulations. That's not the case. You don't necessarily have to work the "fancy" into the poem or have an unhappy life to write about the fullness of life and everything in it. I guess that's a response I'd like readers to have.

VC: What projects are next for you?

CR: I have that new book with the Walker Evans photographs coming out in the spring of 1994. It will be called *Something Permanent.* I always have new books coming out because I'm really prolific and quick. Actually, I have about twenty-five new books coming out. The publishers can hardly keep up with me. We have to spread the books out over a five- or six-year period. It's not that I write very often. I haven't actually written in about seven months now. But when I do sit down to write, I can do a book in a day if the magic is there. For me, writing happens in a very magical way; I just have to wait and have faith that it will happen again.

Poetry is my favorite thing to write. I do love picture books, but I consider many of my picture book manuscripts to be just long poems. Of everything I do, I'd have to say that poetry gives me the most joy and comes easiest to me.

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Paul Fleischman

While growing up, Paul Fleischman had very little interest in becoming a writer. However, his family life and hobbies blended to provide a sturdy foundation for an award-winning writing career. His father, writer Sid Fleischman, read his in-progress stories to young Paul, which helped develop the critical eye of a wordsmith. Fleischman also grew up learning to master the possibilities of the printing press; his parents brought into the home a hand-operated press when he was quite young. His printing experiences influenced what he perceived to be the role of shape and arrangement of words on the page, a vision that to this day provides a major focus within his poetry. In addition to this skillful visual arrangement of words, Fleischman's poetry is characterized by sound effects that make each line a beautiful orchestration of sound.

For Paul Fleischman, writing is a meticulous, painstaking process. It is not unusual for him to spend an entire day to complete a single page of his writing. However, these single pages are most often "finished pages" because all revising and editing are done during this writing process. His dedication to excellence in writing was rewarded in 1989 when Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices *(1988) was granted the Newbery Medal.*

Paul Fleischman lives today in Pacific Grove, California.

Photo: Becky Mojica

JC: Please tell us about your childhood and development as a writer.

PF: My father, Sid Fleischman, is a writer, so I grew up in a writer's household. Of course, this circumstance isn't a necessary part of becoming a writer, but it did play an important part for me. I had all the advantages of books in the house and writers coming to visit us often. As a result, writing just seemed a natural part of life to me. My father also read his own books to my sisters and me chapter by chapter as they were being written. In many ways, we were sounding boards and critics for him. At the time I had no idea I would become a writer, but hearing those books read aloud to me was an important part of my education for the years to come.

There were many other things in my environment that made an impression on me. One day my parents came home with a hand printing press. It wasn't long before I was setting type and designing letterheads and stationery. Later, when I was in seventh or eighth grade, I started my own printing business, printing stationery and business cards for my parents' friends. I did most of the designing, setting of type, and printing. This turned out to be important training for me because designing a business card is very much like designing a book. Both efforts are open-ended propositions. For both, there is not one right answer or just one way of doing things. There are endless possibilities. In my printing a letterhead, I might put the name just above the address, or put the name at the top and the address at the bottom. They could be flush left, flush right, upper- or lowercase, italic or ornamental in design. Learning to deal with these things is very much like learning to deal with all the open-ended questions that come up when one writes. They're not a math problem with only one right answer.

All of this also taught me that just the way printed letters look can be beautiful. The sight of the letter *a* on the page can be a thing of beauty. I used to study type catalogs. I learned all the names of the different varieties of type and what each looked like. As a result, I grew up having strong feelings about every letter in the alphabet. This was especially important for me later when I started writing poetry and started considering elements such as shape and word arrangement on the page.

I remember we also had a shortwave radio at home, and I spent many evenings listening to it. Looking back, I can see that this was also an important influence in my development as a writer. I didn't happen to speak Bulgarian or Japanese or Zulu or any of the other languages I was hearing. Just as the printing press showed me that the shapes of words could be beautiful, the shortwave radio taught me that just the sounds of words could be beautiful. I could hear the music that was in the language. I also learned something else that was to be important later when I started writing books: I learned that history is happening *right now.* One night I listened to the reports of Russian tanks rolling into Czechoslovakia. Another night I heard a very panicked, desperate voice broadcasting in English. It sounded like this person was in a station that was being attacked, and I remember thinking that he might not make it through the night. It was a very intense experience listening to his cries. It turned out I was listening to Radio Biafra. I never found out what happened to this person, but it sent a shiver through me that has never left me. As a result of that, I've tried in my books to bring history to life, to show that it isn't just empty events and places that took place thousands of years ago. I've just finished a retelling of the Trojan War called

Dateline: Troy (forthcoming). Rather than using art to illustrate the story, I used contemporary newspaper stories that parallel the events of the tale. I felt this would give a "here and now" flavor to an ancient story and at the same time show that contemporary events have centuries of resonance. All this started with that shortwave radio.

JC: What was your first writing to be published for young readers?

PF: *The Birthday Tree* (1979) was my first book published for children. I was about to graduate from college and realized I had to do something to make a living. I had thought about becoming a history teacher, but I just didn't feel I was one of those people who was meant to go off to graduate school to study teaching and history. My father suggested I might try writing something. I had some experience in writing, but I had never really had any sort of professional interest in it. I wrote *The Birthday Tree*, but it needed a lot of work. My father went over it with me, and I learned more in that time than I've learned in all the time since. When I finished my revision I sent the story off to Harper & Row, and it was bought right away. As a writer, I was off and running. However, I was soon to learn that most of the time, publishing just isn't that easy. The second book I wrote, *Finzel the Far-Sighted* (1983), was turned down by Harper & Row and many other publishers. It took five years of floating around New York before that manuscript was bought. So, it can be very easy to break in, or it can be very difficult. Perseverance is a must. Now that I think about it, I was lucky I wrote *Finzel* second rather than first because I probably wouldn't have had that perseverance. I might have said, "Oh, forget it," at that point.

JC: How do you work as a writer? Do you have any special habits, customs, or observances you follow as you write?

PF: One way that I differ from most writers these days is that I write with a pencil in a notebook. I really have no use for a computer. They are great for certain things, but they aren't for me. I do a lot of thinking out and outlining and researching first so that most of the book's bridges have been crossed by the time I'm ready to begin the actual writing. In this way, I'm over the hump and the really hard part is over. For me, the hardest part of writing has always been the planning. I think this is true for most writers. Most people write a first draft to answer questions like, "Who are my characters?" and "Where is my story going?" and "What works best here?" That is also why many writers need a word processor; they need to move all of this material around because it is horribly out of shape or sequence. But I don't write that way. I think it all out first and then I write in pencil, making any corrections I need to make via that wonderful correcting tool, the eraser. I write slowly and carefully so that I only have to write something once. I don't write second, third, or fourth drafts. Later, I may make a change here or there or an editor may suggest a change, but these are almost always minor changes. I don't often shift whole paragraphs around. I do all that big work first, in my head.

I am a very slow writer, but of course speed has no part in writing. That's one of the great things about it. There's no clock on the wall, at least not in my study. It usually takes me all day to write one page. I don't see that as a problem. When publishers get a manuscript, all they care about is how good it is. They don't know or care how long it took to get written. Just as when you listen to a symphony, you don't care if you're listening to a piece that took Mozart twenty minutes to write or a piece that took Beethoven days or weeks to compose. All that really matters is the quality of the final product. Today, in publishing, the timing isn't really that important if what you send is polished. That is why my manuscripts are very polished before I send them off. I make sure they achieve this polish by editing and editing my pieces *as* I am writing.

JC: Could you tell us more about your philosophy of writing by sharing a story related to the writing of a poem from *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*, your wonderful collection about the world of insects?

PF: Everything a writer writes is autobiographical, although that might be hard to figure out for the reader—and is sometimes even harder to figure out for the writer. Very often what you're writing is something of a mystery until after the book is published. One of my favorite poems in *Joyful Noise* is "Water Striders." It is the tale of some bugs who find it very easy to walk on water and are quite willing to show anybody else how to do it. However, they are mystified when other creatures try to do it and instantly sink from view. At first glance this might seem impossibly distant from anything that could relate to me, but a writer turns aspects of his or her own character into other characters, which can be human, insect, or anything else. In the case of the "Water Striders," the moral of the tale is simple: If you are a water strider, walk on the water; if you aren't, don't try it—try something else! After that poem was written, I realized what it was saying to me. For a long time I had thought about doing something other than writing, something more in the "save the world" category. But, whenever I thought about doing that sort of work, I realized that it really wasn't where my skills were. If I were to try to improve the water system for some impoverished Third World country, that country would be in much worse shape after I got there. So, this poem was really saying, "Do what you do best"—in my case, stick to writing.

JC: In terms of specific features of your writing, sound is paramount in your work. The musical quality of your poetry makes it come alive and flow from page to reader.

PF: I write my lines of prose and poetry with rhythm behind them. I've always been conscious of the effect of this rhythm. In my first book, *The Birthday Tree,* the very first sentence reads: "Once there was a sailor who fled from the sea." If you look at just the rhythm of that you will discover four beats: "**Once** there was a **sailor** who **fled** from the **sea**." I try to write with a regular series of beats in the background so that, ideally, the sentences unfold like phrases of music one upon the other. When this takes place, the reader is not jarred or thrown off kilter. I don't want experience with the lines, whether it be in prose or poetry, to be like a bumpy carriage ride on a rutted road. To be most effective, all must unfold smoothly.

In addition to the rhythmic aspect of the words, their sounds themselves are important. I'm always watching out for chances for alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and near rhyme. Any repetition of sound sounds good to a reader's ear. Why else would anybody remember "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers"? It certainly isn't the meaning. We remember it because of its music. So, I'm always looking for word combinations that sound good together. In that sentence, "Once there was a sailor who fled from the sea," there's alliteration produced through the repetition of the "w" sound in the words "once" and "was." Assonance connects words through repetition of the short "a" sound in the words "was" and "a." And finally, when the reader gets to the word "sea," the mind's ear remembers the "s" sound from "sailor," just as when you say "Peter Piper" your mind's ear remembers the "p" sound in "Peter" when it gets to "Piper." I try to use sound in this fashion as much as possible in my writing. That same sentence could have been written to have the same meaning but completely different music. It could have been written something like: "There used to be a sailor who lived on the coast, but he decided to move away." Same meaning, no music. To me, it is worth all the time it takes to craft sentences that are musically right. And remember, speed has no place in writing. It may take a long time to get the sentences just right, but in the end all that extra care will be worth it. Kids and adults both love sounds that are pleasing to the ear. It is great when words fit together through rhythm, rhyme, meter, and a host of sound effects.

JC: Is there anything else you look for in writing?

PF: I'm looking above all for heart. I'm looking for something deep, universal, and strong. If writing doesn't have that, then readers won't be moved by it. The poems in *Joyful Noise* deal with universal themes. Plus, they're for the most part told from the point of view of the insects. In these poems, it seems like a real person is talking, rather than just an anonymous third-person voice. The reader hears each character's voice speaking from experience, and that makes a connection between reader and character. I strive to write lines that come alive and to create characters who seem real. I want some voltage flowing between the book and the reader.

Almost all my books have been tied together by universal themes. My last novel, *The Borning Room* (1991), concerns births and deaths. What could be more universal than that? These events touch us all. That's what I'm always looking for—something that will engage the reader and that engages me for the same reason.

JC: Both *I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices* (1985) and *Joyful Noise* begin with short notes that explain how you hope the poems will be read. Now that you have heard hundreds of readers read these poems, is there anything you'd like to add to these directions?

PF: I would recommend that readers first stay close to the original directions. As it says in the introductory comments, the poems are designed so that when read aloud, one person should take the left-hand column, and one person should take the right-hand column. When there are lines on the same level, both readers should read them at the same time, even if they are saying different words. Both readers should start at the top and move down. I would add that as in music, the first time through is the roughest. As readers practice, the poems will get smoother and much more fun to do. My experience has also shown me that the harder a poem seems, the more fun it is to perform once you've got it down. Also, with a little creativity, the poems can be adapted for three, four, or five voices. It really is fun to get a large consort of voices together.

JC: Your knowledge of the insect world is evident in *Joyful Noise,* and this knowledge of entomology adds an element of realism that encircles all in the poems. What type of research did you do before writing this collection?

PF: Years ago I came across a book called *The Strange Lives of Familiar Insects* by Edwin Way Teale, a writer who had a marvelous gift for writing about nature. I found that book in a used bookstore, read through it, and realized that someday I might want to write about insects, because they really *did* have strange and interesting lives. As it turned out, that's exactly what happened. I tried to check out my facts as I wrote so that everything would be accurate. I did lots of book research and asked many questions. At the time I was writing *Joyful Noise* I was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I knew the head of the biology department at the University of New Mexico. His area of specialty was entomology, and I called on him several times to clarify points of information. I certainly wanted to be accurate in the details where that was important.

JC: Two years after your father's book *The Whipping Boy* (1986, award granted 1987) received the Newbery award, your *Joyful Noise* was granted the same recognition. You and your father are the only writers from the same family to author books that were chosen as Newbery Medal winners. What was your reaction when you were given this great honor, and how has it changed your life?

PF: My first reaction was great surprise. The chances of winning the Newbery award are extremely slim, astronomically slim. It is still hard for me to believe that it happened. It is one thing to write a good book, but it takes a stroke of luck to win the Newbery. There are just so many good books written each year. The fact that both my father and I were granted the award was a startling, amazing, wonderful, and unprecedented coincidence for us. When we get together, we smile about it.

Being granted the award gave me more writing time. My wife, who is a nurse, was able to quit her job for the time being and spend more time with our children. I had been taking care of the children while she was at work. Getting the award also gave me the funds with which to build a studio. I had written most of my books in libraries before this studio was built. I can't say that winning the award made it possible for me to publish less commercial books because I was already publishing unconventional, uncommercial books. I was lucky to have a publisher who was willing to go out on a limb with me for different books like *I Am Phoenix* and *Joyful Noise.*

JC: Related to your work as a poet, what plans do you have for the future?

PF: I try not to repeat myself in my writing. I've done two books of poetry designed to be read by two voices. I'm actually thinking of doing another multi-voiced book of poems for three or four voices. Once readers can get together to do two voices, it's not such a large leap to doing three or four. The only thing that bothers me is that it is difficult enough to get two people together who have the time and interest to perform the poems. And the poems might just be too complicated for most readers. This might be my next project, but I don't yet know exactly what form it will take.

JC: What suggestions have you for young writers interested in writing poetry?

PF: First, I would say buy a notebook and jot down your ideas there so you can save them. I used to write my stories and poems in notebooks when I was younger, but through the years they were lost. I wish I still had them. The great thing about writing is that it preserves ideas. I write down *everything* now. I have all kinds of notebooks divided into different categories like characters, stories, descriptions, humor, names, and newspaper clippings. Always have a piece of paper and a pen or pencil with you so you can write down ideas as they come to you. These will be extremely valuable to you later when you sit down to write.

Second, read as much as you can. That's one of the best ways you can learn to write.

Third, don't be afraid to imitate other writers. I was a great imitator when I was younger. Just as art students copy famous paintings in museums, I copied the style of Edward Lear's limericks when I was younger. I also liked Mark Twain and got to the point where I could imitate his style almost exactly. I also imitated Dylan Thomas and my father. Have fun with this imitation. Learn from it. Everybody imitates a different set of writers and has a different experience of life so that the voice that finally emerges is unique.

Finally, write what's in your heart. Write the book, poem, or story that you want to write. That is your best chance of getting published, because that will be your strongest material. Pay no attention to the market. Pay attention instead to what moves you.

Select Bibliography

Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices (HarperCollins, 1988).

I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices (HarperCollins, 1985).

Brod Bagert

Brod Bagert describes his early professional life as that of a "killer advocate lawyer." Today, in a complete about-face, he has traded that intense life of courtroom challenge to become one of the more popular writers of poetry for children and young adults. Even as a youngster, Bagert was deeply interested in poetry, but his transformation to children's poet didn't become a reality until he started writing poems for his daughter to read and perform in school contests. These poems were so popular that neighborhood children soon were begging "Mr. Brod" to write poems for them. The joy he felt in writing and performing poetry made his decision all the more clear. Bagert says, "With poetry I found a way to use my talents to help children grow strong on the inside while I made them laugh on the outside." His decision was one that has enriched the field of children's literature.

*For Brod Bagert, poetry is to be performed—and with the greatest of enthusiasm. He believes that through performance, young readers will be able to feel the pulse and share the electricity of the lines of poems. This is a belief woven into his poetry, which explores the lighter, humorous side of childhood (*Let Me Be the Boss: Poems for Kids To Perform*, 1992) to the splendor of nature (*Alaska: Twenty Poems and a Journal*, 1988). No matter what the subject, Bagert's poetry overflows with an excitement that is contagious.*

Today, Brod Bagert lives with his wife and children in New Orleans, Louisiana.

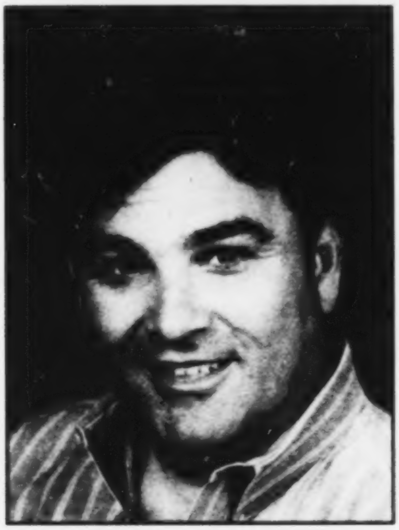

Photo: Mike Posey

VC: As a poet you capture the wonderment of childhood. What was your own childhood like?

BB: I had a wonderful childhood. I grew up in New Orleans and went to Catholic schools. My mother was a full-time Italian mother who saw to it that I never missed a meal. My dad was a judge who saw to it that I never missed a Little League game. I was the third child. My older brother and older sister picked on me whenever they could. Eventually my younger sister arrived on the scene to save me. She gave me somebody to pick on.

I loved sports. I played baseball, tumbled, and wrestled. When I got into high school I realized I would never be a gymnast. Even at a lean body weight I had twenty-six-inch thighs; I just didn't strike the figure a gymnast was supposed to have. All I could do was tumble, and unless I became a circus clown or a cheerleader, that wouldn't do me any good. That's when I decided to become a wrestler. Wrestling is a great sport. It requires complete dedication, and the results are clear-cut. A match ends in either victory or defeat, and if you lose, there's no one to blame but yourself. There was nothing in my childhood experience that fits the stereotype of the "poet." I didn't look like a poet or act like a poet. I did, however, write poetry, and I loved it.

VC: How young were you when you started writing poetry?

BB: I remember when I was first introduced to poetry. Mrs. Toups, my third-grade teacher, read Joyce Kilmer's "Trees"—"I think that I shall never see/ A poem as lovely as a tree." I remember what she told us about poetry: "Everything we do on earth goes away, but great poetry survives and the ideas and feelings of poets live on in their words." That struck me. I think I wanted to live forever, but I knew I could not, so I decided to be a poet. Ray Brandt was a kid in my neighborhood, and I talked him into becoming a poet too. Ray was famous because his Uncle Zeke had been a first baseman for the Chicago White Sox. We got a little tin box to keep our poems in. It was like we were going to make our own treasure. I remember the first poem I wrote: "Tick tock/Tick tock/Tick tock/Goes the clock." I guess I was enamored with the passage of time. However, I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I gave up and threw away the tin box. I didn't write another poem for a year. Then in fourth grade Mrs. Dastugue gave us an assignment to write a poem. I do not remember what I wrote about, but it was pretty good. In fact, it was the second-best poem written in the class. The best was written by a kid whose name I will not divulge; we'll call him "Butch." Butch was not a very good student, so Mrs. Dastugue was very happy to see that he had written such a good poem. I had worked really hard on my poem, but I could see that it had lots of flaws, and I had to admit that Butch's poem was better. His was perfect. It was also strangely familiar. My dad had given us kids a set of books called *Child Craft*, and sure enough, there in the poetry section, I found Butch's poem. I never told on him, for two reasons: one, Butch enjoyed that moment of success, and he really needed it; and two, Butch had been held back for a couple of years. He was the biggest, meanest fourth grader in history. Telling on Butch would not have been a smart thing to do.

After that I didn't write many poems, but I continued an unspoken relationship with poetry, an unfocused desire to be a poet, but I was afraid to think about it. I mean, I had no idea how someone could become a poet. I also wanted to get married and have children. How could a poet support a family?

VC: What subjects did you enjoy in school?

BB: I never really enjoyed school. Elementary school was not painful; it was just boring, at least academically. At home my older brother and sister frequently talked about what they had learned that day at school. I took it all in. As a consequence, I can never remember a time when I didn't already know what was being said in class. The teachers were nice and the kids were lots of fun, but as a learning experience, elementary school was not very exciting. My high school experience is hard to describe. I loved high school and I hated it. Isn't that how it always is? I went to a Jesuit high school. I can't remember liking anything I studied, but now, when I think about the important stuff I've learned in life, I remember that I learned it in high school. The subject I disliked the most was a reading course in Homeric Greek. I was not a dedicated scholar, and I never succeeded in learning to sight-read ancient Greek. Instead, I memorized thousands of lines of Greek text, and I managed to get passing grades. Memorizing Homeric Greek was not as hard as it might seem. Homer was an oral poet. His poetry is beautiful to the ear and has powerful rhythms, so it's easy to memorize. Those memorized sounds from the *Odyssey* were and are my foundation as a poet. I did not know it then, but I know it now, and I am forever grateful to the Jesuits who pounded it into me.

VC: Who were the people who most influenced you as you developed as a poet?

BB: One was a Jesuit scholastic named Tom Fernon. Mr. Fernon taught me English during my junior year in high school. One day he read Emily Dickinson's poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died." He talked about how great it was. I sat there frowning. He said, "What's wrong?" I said, "I don't think the poem is so great—anybody could write that stuff." Oh, the arrogance of youth. He said, "You think you can do that? If you come anywhere close to writing a poem as good as that, I'll give you a B in this course." This was toward the end of the second semester and my grade was between a D and a C, so it sounded like a good opportunity. I wrote a poem about a little pine tree struggling to emerge in the canopy of a forest. A flood came and washed away the soil around the tree so that its roots were exposed. The tree was not going to survive. I can remember intentionally manipulating the poem so that it would occur to Mr. Fernon that I viewed myself as this tree. He never talked to me about the poem, but I did get what I suspect was an otherwise undeserving B. Over the years I have come to love Emily Dickinson and her poems. My "Pine Tree" poem was not even close to the power of her words, and I'm sure Mr. Fernon knew it. I think he also knew he was being manipulated, but he smiled when he read my poem, and I was profoundly encouraged.

The next person who helped was a teacher whose name I cannot remember. She was a young woman in her first year as a college professor, and I was in my first year as a college student. I gave her two of my poems and asked for her opinion. Three weeks later she returned my poems with a frown, and said, "You know Brod, I don't like your poems. I'm not sure I know what they are saying, and I don't think you know what they are saying either. But I'll tell you this: I love the way they sound. I don't think I've ever read anything in English that sounded quite as strong or as beautiful as the words you put in these poems." I look back on those poems now and she was exactly right. I hadn't yet lived enough to develop a rich life experience from which to write, but I felt the passion of life and had begun to express it in the sound of words. I was falling in love with the sound of language, and the Homeric foundation was beginning to bear fruit. So, my poems sounded beautiful, but said very little. Her comments were exactly what I needed to hear. Her honesty did not discourage me. Instead, it was like somebody turned on a light and I saw a doorway.

The next big event was my first publication. In the movie *Dead Poets Society,* they say poetry is best used to woo women. I laughed as I watched that scene. I remember how I used to write poems and read them to the girls I dated. My fraternity brothers used to joke that I used my dates as a captive audience for my poems. I look back on those poems now and feel so sorry for those poor young women, but somebody must have liked my poems because a girl from a neighboring college asked me if they could publish two of them in their literary magazine. I was elated to see my poems in print, in a book, a book that people were going to read. After that it became the practice of the literary community on campus to ask me to contribute to various student anthologies. I was a fraternity kid and did not hang out with the literary students, but they were very kind to me and we grew to like and respect each other.

Then in my junior year I enrolled in a modern poetry course taught by Miller Williams, himself a published poet. I had developed the idea that poems should not just be a wailing expression of a poet's feelings.

I wanted to weave a story line into my poems. The idea was that when my readers read the story, they would experience the feelings as their own. I believed that readers who might not care about my feelings would care about their own. I wrote such a poem and gave it to Mr. Williams for criticism. It was a scary moment; he was a rough critic. Some weeks later, at the start of his class, Mr. Williams produced my poem from his briefcase and held it in his hand in front of the entire class. I held my breath and began to generate the internal defenses I suspected I was about to need. He took two steps toward my desk, hesitated again, smiled, and alluded to a similar occasion in the literary past when one poet returned the early work of some other emerging young poet. Then he handed me the poem and said, "Do it again." How I cherish the memory of that moment. It was the first external evidence to support the poet-feeling inside me. I did not, however, give myself to art. Instead, I went to law school. I still wanted to get married and have children. How could a poet support a family?

The crowning influence in my development as a poet would come much later in my life, fifteen years later. I had married Debby Kerne, my high school sweetheart, I had three beautiful children—I now have a fourth—I was a successful trial lawyer, I had been twice elected to serve as a member of the New Orleans City Council, I had rediscovered the joy of my family, and I had written and self-published a collection of poems for children to perform called *If Only I Could Fly: Poems for Kids to Read Out Loud* (1984). During this time I had developed a friendship with an extraordinary man named Gary Esolen. He was the editor, publisher, and founder of a weekly newspaper called *Gambit*, and he remains the most brilliant human being I have ever known. I gave Gary a copy of *If Only I Could Fly,* and I harangued him with a jumble of thoughts about how poetry needs to be read out loud and how everybody in the world of it is all mixed up about what it is and how it works. I did not know that Gary was himself an accomplished poet and that the oral performance of literature had been the passion of his youth. Gary paused in mid-conversation and said, "Look, Brod, you know so little about this subject that we can't talk about it. You write well, and if you want, I'll pursue these ideas with you, but I'm not going to say another word unless you make a commitment to learn." I agreed, and we assembled a group of friends we jokingly referred to as the "Caffin Avenue Poetry Society." We met once a week around Gary's kitchen table and listened as he read the great poems. It was an interesting group of people. It included a psychiatrist of the Freudian school, an insurance fraud investigator, a museum curator, a psychology student and mother of four children, and the owner of a lumber yard. Gary would read the great poems, but he would never analyze them. He would simply perform them for us. Sometimes we would each memorize a poem and perform them for our friends at social gatherings. The Caffin Avenue Poetry Society was active for three years. It was during that time that I began to write at close to full power.

Gary is a great teacher. He knew that hearing the great poems performed with passion would teach me to write. He performed the poems and talked about the poets as if they were his personal friends. I listened and I wrote. When I was satisfied with one of my new poems, I'd ask Gary to read it. He would first read the poem out loud. When he read, I heard the same intensity I'd heard when he read Shakespeare or Shelley. Then he'd reflect for a moment and tell me a story from his own life, an event during which he had experienced the feelings I had expressed in the poem. Or he would go to his library and find a poem that similarly touched the subject of my own poem. He never analyzed or criticized, and my writing got better and better. His technique is simple. Inside every person there is a desire to communicate. It's especially strong in poets. We write to make the darkness go away. A teacher, by responding emotionally to a poem, completes the act of communication. The teacher pushes the poetry button by stimulating the desire to communicate. Let me see if I can say it more clearly. The great poems teach poets to write. The great teachers stimulate the organ that compels poets to communicate.

Learning to write is like walking down a dark hallway. Both of these actions share a common theme. Each of these people I've described turned on a light. They told me the truth about my work and emphasized what I was doing well. It's important to have people who can give that kind of help, especially when you're young.

VC: From these beginnings, how would you say you have evolved most as a poet?

BB: I now write poems in different voices. Each voice is a distinct poetic personality who writes in his or her own style, and they each have their own collection of work. Tommy Thomason, a friend of mine whom I met through my work with Bill Martin's Pathways to Literacy, told me I'm the only person he knows who has made a career out of schizophrenia! I write the children's poems in the voices of Winnifred and Little Irving. *Let Me Be the Boss* and *Chicken Socks* (1994) are written in their voices. Adam Rib writes adult poems about committed love; he has a book called *Love Poems from Adam Rib: Beyond Romance—The Poetry of Permanent Love* (1991). Then there's *A Bullfrog at Café du Monde* (1986), a collection of poems in the voice of Norman, a typical New Orleanian who writes poems from the heart, soul, and funny bone of the city of New Orleans. *Alaska: Twenty Poems and a Journal* is a collection of poems and a personal journal I wrote while backpacking and kayaking in the wilderness of Alaska. It's the only thing I've written entirely in my own voice.

I also have three unpublished voices. The first is Guido, who writes passionately romantic love poems. Guido's poems are an emotional slaughter. Young adults have been an enthusiastic audience for *The Guido Letters* (forthcoming). Then I have the dual voices of Uncle Jake and Rasmandius the Poet Priest. These are schizophrenic opposites of the same poetic personality. The voice of Uncle Jake walks the bright side of the way. His poetry is beautiful and empowering. When audiences hear Jake's poems, they laugh and cry and walk away inspired. Rasmandius the Poet Priest is Jake's opposite. Rasmandius walks the dark side of the way. He experiences the same reality as Jake, but suffers the pain of it, and his voice embraces that pain. Of all the voices, Rasmandius is the one I read least in public and the one I like most. I don't know if I will ever publish the Rasmandius poems. It's not a matter of privacy. It's just that, unlike my other poems, the Rasmandius voice continues to evolve. It's as though the poems are never finished.

VC: You gave up a successful law practice to become a full-time poet. Just how did that transformation come about?

BB: "Gave up" implies that there was an element of sacrifice. "Lawyering" is hard work, and I don't miss it a bit. I was a lawyer for twenty-one years, and every day of it I was fighting somebody. That's a long time to be in a fight. But even so, the transformation from lawyer to poet is a rough ride, and it didn't happen overnight. It began during what seemed at the time to be the darkest moment of my life. It was the last few days of an election for public office I knew I was destined to lose. I was exhausted and defeated. I arrived home at four o'clock in the morning after making my last TV commercial. I walked into my den and found my wife, Debby, asleep on the floor. Scattered around her were a dozen books of children's poetry. Debby awoke with her characteristic smile and explained that our daughters had entered an elocution contest at school, and she had been looking for poems for them to perform. She had found a good poem for Jennifer but could not find the right poem for Colette. She smiled again and told me that she had reassured Colette, "Don't worry, Colette. When Daddy comes home, he'll write a poem that will be perfect for you to perform." I was very tired. I told Debby I couldn't possibly stay up to write a poem. I went to bed, pulled the covers over my head, and pretended the world wasn't there. As soon as my mind went blank, the first thing I saw was an image of Colette's face with her pouty bottom lip and her round green eyes looking at me, and she was saying, "Daddy, I know you were tired and you couldn't make a poem for me. It's okay. I'll just have to do my best without a good poem." It was more than I could stand. I got up and wrote "The Night I Caught the Burglars" (from *If Only I Could Fly*). I lost the election, Colette won the elocution contest, and my life began to change.

I continued writing poems for my own children. I was fascinated by their feelings as they experienced the struggles and the joys of childhood. Other kids in the neighborhood began to complain, "Mr. Brod, it's not fair! We want you to write poems for us, too." So, I started writing poems for other kids, and before very long I had a whole collection of poems. And these poems were different from other poems for children: They were written for children to perform. I knew what kids needed when they stood up to perform for an audience, and I wrote it for them. The poems were in a real kid's voice saying real kid words in the cadence of real kid speech and expressing real kid feelings. When kids recite those poems, the feelings leap up inside them. They feel real emotion and become the character. I loved these children and I wanted them to have poems they would enjoy, poems in which they could discover themselves. I also wanted them to have poems with which they would win, and win they did.

I began to understand that my poems were *different*. There were lots of poems children liked to hear, but there were very few poems that the children themselves could perform. I discovered that good things happen when you give young readers poems that jump out of their mouths. The audience responds, the performer grows in confidence, and children begin to love poetry. They understand that they can stand up and speak and the world hears them. It's the beginning of voice. It's how we learn to write and speak with eloquence. Suddenly, writing is something children want to do.

So that is how I put together my first collection of poems. I believed in those poems. I knew how well they worked. I had heard them performed by children, and I understood why they were different. And I began to feel that I might have a chance to do something important with my life, to give something of value.

With poetry I found a way to use my talents to help children grow strong on the inside while I made them laugh on the outside. I could make adult audiences laugh and cry and feel feelings that they had forgotten they had. It was wonderful. There is no pleasure in life that gives me such happiness, no work that makes me feel so useful. Even when I was in the limelight as an elected official and everybody wanted to take me to lunch, I always had the sense that I was wasting precious moments, the feeling that there was something else I should be doing. It was in the writing of words for children to perform that I found purpose. When I write, I'm alive. When my writing succeeds, I am free.

VC: So how did this first book get published?

BB: I really worked at that. People would call my office and ask for a copy of this or that poem. My secretary complained that she did as much poetry work as she did legal work. Teachers also started asking me to visit their schools. I began to live a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde existence. My staff never knew when I was going to switch from killer advocate lawyer to joyous kid's poet. I decided I wanted to publish a book, so I started sending query letters to agents and publishers. No one wanted to look at the manuscript. I was prepared for rejection, but I was not prepared for this. I couldn't even get anyone to *look* at the manuscript, so I published it myself.

It was the beginning of a wonderful time. More and more teachers invited me to their schools. I loved performing for the kids, the kids loved performing for me, and day by day the poet inside me grew bigger and the lawyer grew smaller. I started to get invitations to teacher conferences, and I soon began to travel outside of Louisiana. I began to despair of ever finding a real publisher, but I loved what I was doing and I was happy for the chance to do it. Then one day I met a real fairy godmother, my own fairy godmother. I had delivered a keynote speech at a children's literature conference at the University of South Florida, and I was autographing books for a delightfully long line of teachers. One of those teachers turned out to be Bernice Cullinan, the poetry editor for Boyds Mills Press. She asked me if I had a manuscript for another book. I said that I just happened to have one in my bag, and that was the beginning of a relationship that has changed my life. Since then I've done two books with Boyds Mills and have several more under contract with them.

So that's how it started. I believed in myself, I believed in my poems, and I believed in the power of poetry to enrich humankind. Without that faith, my work would have gotten nowhere. But it's hard to describe the joy of finding someone like Bee Cullinan. Poetry and children are her life's work. We soon discovered that we had something in common.

VC: When you set up your own publishing company, how did you come up with the name "Juliahouse"?

BB: It's a magic name for me. Some of my fondest memories of childhood took place in a house in the country in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. I remember early mornings when my grandmother would take us out on her pier to catch crabs. In a few hours we'd have a whole hamper of blue crabs, and we'd run home as fast as we could. The tar surface of the street would bubble in the midday sun and burn our feet. The tar was so soft you could find the flattened bodies of frogs, big crickets, and snakes smushed into the surface. The name of that tar strip of childhood memory was Julia Street. Then when I was in law school, I was a night librarian in the Louisiana Supreme Court library. I locked up at 9:00 P.M., and it became my habit to go down to the old book section and read, hour after hour, in complete privacy. One night I found an 1857 edition of the *New Orleans City Directory,* and in it I discovered a Captain Charles Bagert. He was the skipper of the *Schooner Julia,* which was anchored at the Julia Street Wharf. Years later my law office was on the corner of Julia Street and Baronne Street. So, when I was looking for a name of a poetry house, the name "Juliahouse" just jumped into my head. It's a pretty name, and it had just the right connections for me.

VC: Tell us about your own process of composing.

BB: I can write anywhere. I can sit at a table with ten people in the middle of a banquet and focus on a piece of writing. It's not that the world disappears; it's just that the world doesn't matter. Writing focuses my concentration completely. There is nothing else I want to do, no place else I want to go, nobody else I want to be, and nothing else I want to have. When I write poetry, I don't write it alone in a room to massage some hurt feeling, although I certainly get hurt feelings and they are sometimes part of what I write. I write because there is something in me that wants to make light in darkness.

My poems also have to pass a kind of field test. Reading my poems out loud to an audience is part of the writing process. When I have a group of new poems, I read them to a bunch of kids. Some poems work and some don't. I can't lie to myself about a poem when I perform it. The minute I read it out loud to the children, I get an instant and utterly honest evaluation of the poem. Before a poem goes into one of my books, it has to pass the kid test.

VC: A hallmark of your poetry is that you share the lighter side of childhood. Your poems are very funny ("My Handsome Prince," "The Even Trade"). Even in a poem like "Dr. Womback's Needle" (all from

Let Me Be the Boss), a serious subject, getting a shot, is shown in a humorous light.

BB: My ideas for children's poems seldom begin with funny stuff. They almost always begin with an awareness of something that's really hard for kids to do or an awareness of the feelings with which kids struggle. So while the tone of the poem may be funny, the feeling inside the poem is usually serious. Every once in a while I let the poem retain a serious tone, but for the most part, when I focus on a strong feeling, I tend to write about it in a funny way. Kids like to laugh, and I think it helps for kids to laugh about feelings that are at their root serious. Comedy in literature is a powerful form. It permits us to look at the dark side of things with a smile. I believe that some of the great philosophers of our time are the stand-up comics. In comedy we hear the profound and we laugh at it.

I also suspect there's a relationship between the thing that makes us feel a poem and the thing that makes us laugh at a joke. The joy of both poems and jokes occurs in a dynamic transaction between teller and audience. How can I say this? I do not write poems to express my feelings to you; I write poems to evoke feelings inside of you. I try to leave just enough unsaid so that you create the feelings and, therefore, feel them as your own. The poem facilitates an act of creativity in the reader. So a poem is a place in which readers get to perform creative acts of their own. The poem leads you to it. It places you in an environment where you can't help but succeed, and when you complete the poem by your own creative act, you'll feel what I feel when I wrote it. The result is a joy of communication unmatched in human experience.

VC: Another hallmark of your work is that you are able to create whole situations or stories in very small spaces. Many of your poems are a mere four to six lines, yet in each you are able to present a magnificent slice of childhood.

BB: Most of my poems start a lot longer, but I'm a fierce self-editor. I have this belief that my audience shouldn't have to plod through a whole bunch of words just because I wrote them. I try to write poems that capture the audience. We hear talk about poems as being either narrative, dramatic, or lyric—textbooks seem to suggest that these are different genres of poetry. I think it's a mistake. Narrative, dramatic, and lyric do not describe different kinds of poems; they describe different qualities found in poems, qualities which can and should occur simultaneously in a single poem. Narrative means the poem tells a story, dramatic means there is a character expressing feelings as a result of conflict, and lyric means the language of the poem is beautiful to say and hear. Examine the poems that have survived the test of time. You will find beauty in the way the sounds fit together, the tension of consonants interposed between vowel sounds, the natural rhythm of language. You will also find a story, although most of the story elements will usually be implied, and in that story you will find a character with feelings. Those qualities are what I strive for in my poems, and I try to weave them into the smallest possible space.

It's important to thrust quickly to the meat of the matter, especially when writing for kids. I write to move children quickly into the center of the experience. The opening line of a poem should start right in the middle of an event and give enough that the audience can deduce what is happening. In "Fancy Restaurants" (from *Let Me Be the Boss*), for example, the kid is mimicking the waiter and it opens, "Sorry, young man,/ We have no hamburgers," and the reader knows right away what the scene is: There's a kid in a fancy restaurant with a fancy menu, and all this kid wants to eat is a hamburger. I believe this is the way poems should begin for youngsters.

VC: *Alaska: Twenty Poems and a Journal* is a beautiful collection of poems about your experiences while on a backpacking excursion through that state. Please tell us how this excursion came about.

BB: I was at a family wedding reception and found myself in a conversation with Mike Vales, the nephew of my wife's brother-in-law. Mike is an enthusiastic man who lives with a perpetual smile on his face. He's an athlete who one summer rode his bicycle across the country to dramatize his support for a charitable cause. He's that kind of person. He'd been to Alaska and kept saying how beautiful it was, the glaciers and this and that. Every time I said it sounded great he'd say, "Let's go!" It wasn't long before I heard myself answer, "Okay! Let's go!" The next thing I knew I was in a kayak with a bunch of seals around me and I was asking myself, "What am I doing here?"

VC: What was the most difficult aspect of writing poetry while making your way through the wilderness?

BB: The hardest thing about writing those poems was staying awake in the tent. It was August and we were close to the Arctic Circle, so the days were very long. I'd be exhausted at night. I would find myself in the tent, with everything hurting, and I would have a bunch of stuff to write about that day. That is why the prose in the journal tends to be very lean; I was really tired. I love the poems in that book. It's a quiet book. It is really one of my favorites.

VC: Older readers will find *A Bullfrog at Çafé du Monde* a true delight. While some poems here may be enhanced by first-hand knowledge of specific locations, the collection as a whole captures the heart and soul of the magical city of New Orleans. One eternal dilemma of the poet is how to balance the specific ("A Bullfrog at Café du Monde") with the universal ("All Saints Day"). What are your views related to this? How specific can a poet get without losing a distant reader?

BB: You've asked the very question I struggled with when I wrote that book. The minute I choose a language to write in, I eliminate a bunch of people who can't understand that language. It's just a question of where you draw the line. It makes sense not to be so specific that you eliminate too big a portion of the audience, but by the same token you still have to exist in a concrete place and time with the characters you create.

Now in *A Bullfrog at Café du Monde,* I have to confess a certain regional petulance. Think about this. I was raised in New Orleans—a tropical swamp. As a senior in high school, I had seen snow twice in my life. I had never seen the ground freeze. On those rare winter mornings when the temperature inched below freezing, we'd marvel at the thin layer of ice that had formed overnight on the top of the dog's water bowl. It was as though the elves had done magic. I had very little experience with a cold climate, and very little connection with cold climate metaphors. Yet when I read the poetry of Robert Frost, I was transported to a winter wonderland. I had read the words "a frozen ground swell" in his poem "The Mending Wall," and I had no idea what he was talking about. It was the same for all us warm climate kids, but we read Frost all the same, and we learned to love his poems—snow, ice, New England, and all.

I wrote *A Bullfrog at Café du Monde* as a love song to my hometown. I love New Orleans and know it inside and out. I have lived in the bowels of its politics and reveled in the spirit of its celebrations. Part of a poet's job is to give beauty back to the place and people of his or her home. I wanted New Orleans to have her own poems—poems written in the rhythm and cadence of her own accent, poems unique to her places and things. Maybe people from other places will want to read these poems someday, and when they do they'll learn about life in New Orleans, just like Frost helps us learn about life in New England.

VC: Chicken Socks is a collection that captures the joys, fears, and laughter of children. The poems here examine events that form the spokes of childhood. What is it about Brod Bagert that allows him to capture these special moments?

BB: My standard answer is that it helps to be an eight year old in the body of an adult. There is a more accurate answer, but it's a little hard to say. It has to do with empathy. Ever since I was a little kid, I always felt what everybody else felt around me. If somebody got his feelings hurt, my feelings were hurt. If somebody felt angry, I was angry. If somebody felt happy, I felt happiness inside of me. I used my imagination to internalize everything I saw. When I became a lawyer, it was very hard. If I was in a courtroom and a judge sentenced someone to life in prison, I felt what it was like to be sentenced to life in prison. I thought everybody was like that.

This empathy sounds very humane, but there is a point in the creative process where it crosses the line and becomes a kind of artistic cannibalism. It's hard to describe, and I think you will see it more clearly when placed against the shadow of its darker side. I once had a client, an old woman and a close friend, who came to me for some advice after her son had passed away. I listened to her story and I felt her pain as it became mine. But then I realized that I was doing something different. I had begun to memorize the patterns of her speech. I watched how she moved her eyes and what she did with her hands. I observed and digested her feelings like a vulture so that I could recreate them in a character. That was the first time I was actually aware of doing this, and I was surprised, almost shocked by it. It was empathy without sympathy, and it unsettled me.

Now on the brighter side of the same process, that is exactly what I do when I'm around kids. I feel their feelings as my own, and I watch what they do. When I see them do something where their action is in itself a metaphor for one of the fundamental conflicts that we experience in life as human beings, then I say, "This is something to write about!"

VC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

BB: I have four more books written and under contract with Boyds Mills Press, and I have written and begun polishing two new collections of poems—animal poems and poems for first graders.

I also have another project that is very close to my heart. We tend to think about language skills as learning to read and write, yet the most frequently used and most important language skill is the ability to communicate orally. Our schools tend to neglect oral skills, and oral eloquence has become a rarity in our culture. I advocate teaching children poetry by the Performance Method, which relies heavily on the oral performance of poems by children. When kids perform poetry they understand it, they love it, and they develop voice as writers. But something else happens—something of great importance in our culture. The performance of poetry engenders oral eloquence. So, I have begun to write a book about teaching poetry by this Performance Method. Poetry is as simple as dirt. It's ice cream and cake and people love it. I believe that when we clear away the mist and myth that encode poetry, we will discover a delightful and universally popular art form. I have wanted to do this project for a long time, and I am very excited about it.

VC: Do you have a special message to pass along to your readers?

BB: First of all, thanks for reading my poems. I write them for you, and when you read them, you give my life meaning. Ten thousand years from now we'll all be gone. Just as Homer and Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson are gone, I'll be gone and you'll be gone and our children's children will have come and gone. All that remains is the echo of our song, an echo that grows weak with the passing of time and must be rejuvenated by the voice of each generation. So, discover the beauty inside you and give it voice. Let that voice become the driving force of your life. One of my favorite Uncle Jake poems ends with these lines. I think it's what I want to say most to my readers:

> Live each moment, not its future or past.
> There once was a first, and will soon be a last.
> Like the alphabet song life begins and it ends.
> So sing out each letter my children,
> Sing loudly each letter my friends.
>
> (From "The ABC Song," © 1994 by Brod Bagert)

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Lillian Morrison

Lillian Morrison, poet and anthologist, has spent the better part of five decades introducing young readers to poetry that jumps, rumbles, and roars. Her own poems, and the poems she chooses for her anthologies, invite active reading and call to the reader to tap a foot, chant a line, drum a rhythm. She believes the most exciting poems are those in which the rhythm and sound effects work in harmony to imitate the actions described within the lines. Her own poems range from The Break Dance Kids: Poems of Sport, Motion, and Locomotion *(1985) to* Overheard in a Bubble Chamber and Other Sciencepoems *(1981). Her anthologies cover everything from poems about basketball* (Slam Dunk: Poems about Basketball, *1994) to poems about baseball* (At the Crack of the Bat: Baseball Poems, *1992). All jump to life the minute the covers are opened.*

As an anthologist, Morrison also hopes to introduce young readers to poems they might not otherwise have the opportunity to sample. To this end, she spends much of her time searching out-of-print books and a wide variety of magazines and journals for poems she believes are too good for children and young adults to miss. These poems are then collected and cataloged until a new anthology beckons. According to Morrison, anthologies are especially important because they introduce readers to new poets, which may then prompt the readers to explore specific books written by those poets.

Today, Lillian Morrison lives in New York City.

JC: Please tell us about your childhood.

LM: I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, which is right across the Hudson River from New York City. I was the middle one of three children; I have an older sister and a younger brother. My brother and I were close in age and close friends as well. We were partners in everything. We had a very physically active childhood and took part in all kinds of games and activities—leapfrog, timed races, roller skating. We also played every kind of ball game one could think of, from boxball to stoopball to stickball. The street was our playground.

As for my early schooling, I went to six different elementary schools because our family moved so often. I didn't mind. For me the matter of school was quite simple: If I liked the

Photo: Elizabeth Gilliland

teacher, I liked school. In high school I was fortunate to have two teachers who influenced me greatly. One was a mathematics teacher, a man who had great enthusiasm for his subject and a sense of humor. I remember he never gave exams or used a text. Instead, we spent all our time in that class solving challenging math problems. His enthusiasm rubbed off on me, and as a result I later majored in mathematics in college. I also had a wonderful English teacher who had the same kind of enthusiasm for her subject. She was the first to introduce me to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Partly because of those two teachers, I still have an interest in mathematics and I love to read poetry.

JC: What would you say was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

LM: I wasn't one of those poets who started writing at a young age. Even as a teenager, I didn't write poetry. I was always very sensitive to sound, though, and read all the time, but it wasn't until I was out of college and working in a library that I became an insatiable reader of poetry and started my own writing. However, my interest in poetry may have started before I could even speak when my mother would rock me and sing little songs to me. Also, my father was a great reader and used to read poetry aloud to us kids. Poe's "The Raven" was his favorite. I also loved jump rope rhymes and the other rhymes I heard on the street. I remember a great feeling of exhilaration when I heard someone yell, "Marguerite, go wash your feet—the Board of Health's across the street!" I loved the combination of the beat, the rhythm, and what the rhyme said. The jump rope rhymes and bounce-ball rhymes, which had action combined with them, were even more thrilling to me: "Down the Mississippi where the boats go whoosh—along came a sailor who gave a push." I just loved that combination of action and rhyme. Even in high school, when we would have an assembly to practice football cheers, I'd get goose bumps when we'd yell, "Boom get a rat trap bigger than a cat trap!" I have always been very sensitive to rhythm and sound, and that has influenced my writing greatly, especially my poetry.

JC: How did your writing for children grow from these interests?

LM: I started writing for children after I graduated from college. I took a position in a library, and my main duty was to work with teenage readers. My first books were actually anthologies of folk rhymes I put together for these teenagers. They were always bringing in their autograph albums for me to sign. While signing, I would also read the other verses they had collected and discovered that many were catchy and quite funny. As a hobby, I started collecting these, although my initial thoughts were not of publication. Sometimes I shared them with the kids in the library. Eventually, I ended up with so many verses that a collection just took shape. My first book was called *Yours Till Niagara Falls* ([1950] 1990). This little collection of autograph verses was extremely successful and got me started in publishing for children. There were two sequels to this book: *Remember Me When This You See* (1961) and *Best Wishes, Amen* ([1974] 1989). All these collections had verses like these:

> You can tell a tree
> By the fruit it bears,
> But you can't tell a boy,
> By the sneakers he wears.
>
> (From *Best Wishes, Amen,* © 1974 by Lillian Morrison)

I also like this popular verse:

> Now I lay me down to rest,
> I hope I pass tomorrow's test.
> If I die before I wake,
> That's one less test I'll have to take.
>
> (From *Remember Me When This You See,* © 1961 by
> Lillian Morrison)

These verses really are quite fun to come back to time and time again. If you own an autograph album, they also help you remember the people who wrote them for you; it is fun to look back and think of these people as you get older.

From this I started doing other collections of folklore. I became very much interested in all types of folk verse, especially humorous pieces, written by everyday people who weren't "literary." I ended up putting together six collections of various types of folk rhymes. At the same time I was assembling these, my publisher knew that I was beginning to write my own poetry on the side. I was asked to submit a group of poems, and these became the first book of my own pieces: *The Ghosts of Jersey City* (1967). This was a collection published for adult readers. My first collection of my own poems published specifically for children was *Miranda's Music* (1968), which I wrote with a friend of mine, Jean Boudin. I wrote twenty-five of the poems in that collection, and she wrote the other twenty-five. I wanted to do this collection because while working with teenagers I realized there was very little poetry written for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade group—the junior high age.

JC: Who were the writers who influenced you as you developed as a writer?

LM: I always loved Gerard Manley Hopkins. He worked with sounds in such a wonderful way. The rhythms and sounds within his lines convey so much emotion. I know his poetry influenced me, if not consciously, certainly unconsciously. I also admired the work of Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, and William Carlos Williams. There also have been many women influences; these would include May Swenson, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. As for those who write for children, I have always admired and respected the work of X. J. Kennedy, Eve Merriam, Valerie Worth, Myra Cohn Livingston, and Lilian Moore. I particularly love X. J. Kennedy's humor. While I have no doubt all of these writers played some part in my development as a poet, I would still have to say the most significant influences have been the anonymous folk rhymes and memorable rhythms I heard and felt in my childhood.

JC: How would you say you have evolved most as a writer through the years?

LM: My process of composing has always been about the same. A thought, a line, or a rhythm will pop into my head, sometimes in connection with an emotion but not always, and I'll have to decide whether to go along with it. As a writer, you quickly learn to select which ones are interesting enough to weave into a pattern, structure, or little dance called a poem. Most people let these little ideas which come to mind go by, but a writer holds on to them. These thoughts can also come at odd times, so you have to create a climate of receptivity and attention to the world around you. I get many of my ideas when I'm just waking up in the morning and am still half-asleep. As a matter of fact, many of my best lines come at that time. I have a notebook by my bed just for these occasions and because sometimes I dream a line that seems very significant and I want to capture it before it drifts away. There are at least three poems in *Overheard in a Bubble Chamber* which grew from lines that came to me while I was sleeping or just waking up. To me it's just so strange how the subconscious mind works while one is asleep.

Today I prefer to write in my bedroom, which is also my study. But sometimes a poem sort of pursues me. Images and structures or the right word for a poem I'm working on will suddenly come to me while

I'm waiting for a bus or watching someone walk by. There was one poem I did called "The Sprinter" (from *The Sidewalk Racer and Other Poems of Sports and Motion,* 1977) that was the result of nineteen revisions, and most of those revisions took place on the subway on my way to work. Sometimes I'll stop what I'm doing, no matter where I am, and jot down a good line or ideas for poems as they come to me.

JC: In one of your more recent books, *Whistling the Morning In: New Poems* (1992), the world of nature is brought to life by a balance of personification and your trademark rich imagery. Through this balance, all objects come alive and add life to the lines.

LM: I have always noticed resemblances in things. Many of these come to me as little surprises from a part of me that is only half-conscious. The conscious part comes later in the revision process; this is also the most difficult and challenging stage. As someone said, writing is more perspiration than inspiration. For me, the original thought that something resembles something else has always come naturally. Readers of my poetry will see this in a poem like "Rain And Snow" (from *Whistling the Morning In*):

> The rain comes down in stripes
> And hits the ground in dots
> And wets the streets and houses
> And all the empty lots.
>
> The snow comes down like feathers
> Drifting through the sky
> And lightly lays a blanket
> On roads and passersby.
>
> (© 1992 by Lillian Morrison)

At times I tend to *think* in personification and metaphor. We are all slightly different in the way we react to the world; this is just how I react. The great thing about poetry is that a poet is able to share this individual view or reaction through the lines. How each person sees the world is always interesting, and for this reason it is fun to read the works of *all* poets.

JC: *Overheard in a Bubble Chamber* is a collection of poems about science and its relationship to the world around us. Each poem here, through your powerful detail, adds for young readers another dimension to our existence. In creating this detail you use a complex, often highly technical vocabulary. Even though there is a glossary at the end of the collection, the reader must put a great deal of effort into reading these poems because of the language employed.

LM: I don't think any readers, especially children, like poems that talk down to them. I think they can see it and feel it right away if a poem seems condescending. I prefer they be challenged a bit, especially by the sound, structure, and language found within a poem. Even if you only half-understand a poem, you can like it. It may take readers some time and several readings before they get the whole feeling and meaning, but anything worth reading is worth putting a little extra time and effort into. And, in my mind, this book was meant for junior high and high school readers.

While I was working for the library, I read many books about mathematics, physics, and biology so that I would be able to provide help and answer questions for the teenagers who would ask about these subjects. The books were quite interesting to me, and the vocabulary would often spark some kind of poem for *Overheard in a Bubble Chamber.* A word or a phrase I'd come across would make me think of something else. The poems that resulted were not so much about science as they were about love, life, and death, but triggered by the words of science. I have a poem in the collection called "Poets and Mathematicians"—I do think both have much in common.

JC: Two of your more popular collections of poetry are *The Sidewalk Racer and Other Poems of Sports and Motion* and *The Break Dance Kids: Poems of Sport, Motion, and Locomotion.* Another characteristic of your work as a poet can be seen in these collections: Each word and image in the poems serves to move the reader into an active reading of the lines. The collections come alive the minute the books are opened. Readers are invited to jump right into the lines.

LM: These collections came about because of my love of sports, physical action, body movement, and dance all combined with my love of language. I get a thrill when I'm writing a poem that moves, when lines get jumping. Pure description doesn't do very much for me. Something must happen in the poem; the lines must move. This is where a lot of the thrill of writing poetry comes for me. These poems also grew from the sports I enjoyed and the experiences I remembered or imagined as a spectator. In many of the poems I tried to get inside the minds of the athletes so that readers would have a deeper feeling for the actions being described. I would also have to say that both collections came out of my physically active childhood and love of rhythms. So, I write and collect poems like these because I *feel* these poems.

JC: This same characteristic, this same motif of motions and actions, can be seen in many of the anthologies you have created. *Sprints and*

Distances: Sports in Poetry and the Poetry in Sport ([1965] 1990) and *Rhythm Road: Poems To Move To* (1988) contain poems that also range in subjects from swimming ("400 Meter Freestyle" by Maxine Kumin, in *Sprints and Distances*) to surfing ("The Surfer" by Judith Wright, in *Rhythm Road*). These anthologies make nice companions to the collections of your own poems.

LM: Both the anthologies and my own collections were spawned from the same experiences, and I hope readers will enjoy the two together. In the anthologies, and especially in *Rhythm Road,* I enlarged the focus to include not only sports poems but poems in which the rhythm imitates the action being described. In other words, as the lines are read, a particular rhythm will establish a beat or tempo in the reader that will parallel the actions being described in the poem. I felt this would help readers get a deeper experience and more excitement from the lines. For me, *these* are the exciting poems. I wanted readers to feel, for example, in a poem about riding that they were actually riding a horse, and I wanted this feeling to come from the way the lines were written. It was difficult to find the poems that were built in this fashion, but they are out there if one searches for them. It is a great accomplishment when a poet can combine rhythm and structure to achieve this movement. I also felt these active poems would help children experience their world in a richer way and help them become more aware of what they are seeing and hearing in the world. For this reason I suggest the poems be read aloud. A reader can miss so much if a poem is read silently.

JC: How would you describe yourself as an anthologist, and do you have a particular philosophy that guides your work in this area?

LM: My work today as an anthologist also has its roots in my childhood. I have always been a collector. For example, when I was a child we lived in a place that had a little backyard that was full of bent, rusty nails. I would collect these nails, hammer the rust off, then hammer them straight and arrange them by size. I spent many peaceful days doing that. I also collected baseball cards and pictures of favorite movie stars. I was always making lists, comparing objects, or sorting something. Now that I think more about it, that may be one of the major reasons I became a librarian—these activities were part of my work in the library. My work as an anthologist was just a natural outgrowth of these interests. An anthologist is really a person who enjoys collecting and sorting pieces of literature.

When I started putting together anthologies I wanted them to be a contribution, to be about "new" subjects, at least as far as publishing was concerned. For instance, there were no anthologies of sports poetry when I assembled *Sprints and Distances* except for a very ancient and dated one designed for adult readers. In my early anthologies I also wanted to bring together poems from all kinds of sources people might not be aware of. All the "collecting" that was involved in this process was especially enjoyable to me.

My philosophy related to this work is simple. As an anthologist I tend to collect poems that excite me or that strike me in some particular or unusual way. I like to share with other readers the pleasure I feel after reading a good poem. I have files full of poems that I like which are arranged according to theme. When I put together a collection, I draw from these. Again, this is all part of the collecting I enjoy so much. And I like to put the poems together into an organized, interesting whole. I enjoy this arranging.

JC: What do you see as the particular function of the anthology?

LM: First and foremost, anthologies should bring together pieces from places that readers might not have access to: books out of print, magazines, poems from around the world, and so on. In this way, readers can sample a wide variety, and hopefully, each person will find something of interest. I try to include poems that are familiar and others unfamiliar and try for a wide range of tone and viewpoint: humorous, serious, etc. Also, not all readers will like all pieces. If readers do not like something while glancing through an anthology, they don't have to put down the book and move to another activity; they can keep looking until they find something more in line with their own interests. This might be as close as a single page away. I also hope an anthology will introduce readers to new authors. When this happens, the readers can move on to entire collections done by those authors. In many ways, anthologies should be thought of as samplers.

JC: One of your newest anthologies is *At the Crack of the Bat*. This would appear to be a different sort of anthology for you in that the focus here is upon a single subject: baseball. Within this world of baseball, everything is covered from playing stickball to a tribute to Roberto Clemente. How did this collection come about and why the focus upon a single subject?

LM: The anthology is about a single subject, baseball, because one was long overdue for this subject. At the time I started this project I did not know of any collection of baseball poems geared toward younger readers. The past ten years have seen the publication of a plethora of books containing every other type of baseball literature, but I couldn't find any collections of poems. In the past couple of years this has changed, but *At the Crack of the Bat* was the first book of poems about baseball compiled for the younger reader. The book also came about because baseball is one of my favorite sports. It was a pleasure searching through magazines, journals, and books to find these poems. I also had one other special motivation here. There are many more youngsters who like baseball than there are youngsters who like poetry. It was my hope that for some of these readers, just reading about a sport they loved would get them to appreciate poetry in a larger sense.

JC: At the end of this collection is a section that gives background information about many of the ballplayers mentioned in the poems, which is also a different feature for an anthology of this type.

LM: I think that section adds a little more interest to the book because some readers may want to know more about a particular ballplayer mentioned in a poem. This is especially true if the ballplayer is an old-timer and the reader doesn't know his stats, records achieved, or teams played for. I feel the information provides background necessary to bring these people to life and, in some cases, add a little social history. This book will soon be out in paperback, and I have had to change some of the material in this section because some of the modern players mentioned are now with different teams.

JC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

LM: I would like to see my poetry introduced as just something to enjoy for the feelings it gives or so that a child could read it and think, "Well, this is something I have experienced but have never seen expressed before. Yes, that is how it is!" For this to happen, I'd like to see a more casual approach to poetry taken. I don't care to see poetry analyzed too much, and I especially don't care to see *my* poetry presented in the context of vocabulary building, speech lessons, and other similar activities. I would like my poems to be enjoyed for their own qualities of sound, rhythm, thought, and emotion. At the same time, I know it is natural for a certain amount of vocabulary building and discussion of what makes a poem good to come into play, but too much analysis can spoil it for some children. Unusual or new words found in poems, like many of those found in *Overheard in a Bubble Chamber,* should certainly be discussed, but they should not be the main focus when those poems are shared. Above all, poetry should be presented as something to enjoy for itself.

JC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

LM: I am now working on a collection of poems about basketball. As a matter of fact, I just finished writing a few poems for that project. The working title of the collection is *Slam Dunk.* I've also been writing a collection of my own original riddle poems and verses. Years ago, I brought out a collection of folk riddles called *Black Within and Red Without* (1953), but it has long since been out of print. It was very popular for a while, especially with third graders. In my new collection, I am using the same "folk" style and flavor that was used in the earlier book, but the answers to my riddles will be familiar to kids of today. Here are two samples:

> "At first, I am hard and small
> Without any taste at all.
> Then it's ricochet, ricochet, puff!
> I'm an edible piece of fluff."
>
> (© 1993 by Lillian Morrison)
>
> "It sweeps the town
> Without brush or broom.
> Open your window;
> It will sweep your room."
>
> (© 1993 by Lillian Morrison)

The answers? Popcorn and the wind, of course.

JC: Do you have a special message you would like to pass along to your readers?

LM: Read and write as much as you can. Read poems aloud for the pleasure of the sound and rhythm. Find your own meaning in the poems; make them personal. The reading of poetry will widen your world and make your life richer. I agree with Robert Frost who said that poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom. I really do believe that the reading and writing of poetry will help you see better, hear better, and understand better. It is good for your brain and your spirit!

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Ashley Bryan

Ashley Bryan is a master storyteller, artist, and poet. When the creative urge strikes and these talents are combined, the results are writings that are aural and visual delights for readers of all ages. Bryan's writings are characterized by a powerful blend of close rhyme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia, which grows from a lifelong love of music. In both a symbolic and literal sense, this love of music provides a common motif connecting poem to poem. In short, Bryan's poems "sing" to the reader.

Bryan's Sing to the Sun *(1992) was granted the 1993 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award as the outstanding book of poetry for young people. In addition to writing the poems in this award-winning collection, Bryan also painted the striking illustrations that accompany the lines. Many of his paintings have their roots in his study of African sculpture, masks, and rock paintings. When "partnered" with his poems, these illustrations add a dimension of soul and beauty to the experience of reading.*

Today, Ashley Bryan prefers to practice his artistry at his home in Isleford, Maine, or while enjoying the surroundings of a home belonging to his family in Antigua in the West Indies. No matter where the location, he says, "Poetry is at my center as a human being."

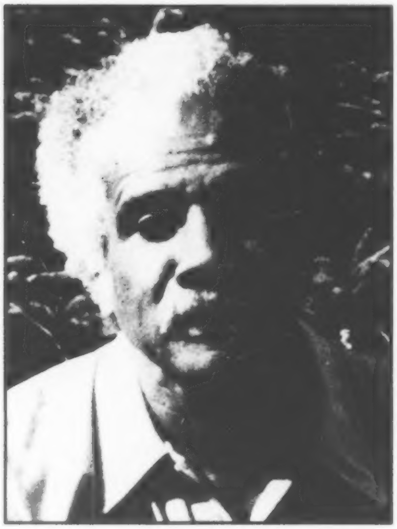

Photo: Matthew Wysocki

VC: Please tell us where you grew up and what you were like as a child.

AB: I was born in New York City and raised in the Bronx. My parents were born in Antigua and came to New York after World War I. I was the second of six children; there were four boys and two girls. My parents also raised three cousins with us who were brothers and sisters in that sense. So, it was a large family.

I grew up during the Depression years of the 1930s. At that time artists were employed in the communities to teach free art and music classes. My parents sent us out to these free programs. Children are all-around performers in all areas of learning, and in that respect I was no different from anyone. I enjoyed drawing, painting, and music in those free classes, and that supplemented the work I did in school. My elementary school in the Bronx was PS 2. At that time the public schools in New York were very strong. They had good programs and weren't overcrowded in those days; the overcrowding came after World War II.

During the 1930s the communities were mixed in terms of those who lived there. The one in which I grew up included German, Irish, Italian, and Jewish families. My family went to a German Lutheran church in the neighborhood. It was a big, older, established church right next to the elementary school that we attended. We told our parents we wanted to go to that big church where the bells rang on Sunday and the windows were so bright in the evenings when we passed by. We didn't know it at the time, but we were the first black family to attend that church.

New York was very different in those days. The Works Progress Administration—called by most the WPA—employed people to keep each neighborhood clean, so there was always someone out sweeping the streets and cleaning up the parks. Looking back, I'd say the WPA street and park cleaners were educational groups as well. They taught us to be concerned about our schools, our local community, and our total environment. As a result, we were very careful about things. Children didn't litter in the streets or parks because someone would tell them not to do that. Respect was developed. It really was a different city, and a different world, then. Children were free to go in groups to museums and the zoo. When we were a little older we could get on the bus or train and go to places like the Metropolitan Museum and the Natural History Museum. We didn't have to be as concerned about personal safety then. I loved seeing the art in these museums. I really believe these experiences had a great influence on me as an artist and writer.

VC: Did you have other hobbies or favorite activities?

AB: My parents told me to try anything I could that was creative. As a result, music and playing instruments were both a natural part of my growing up. I was taught that anything creative was a way of entertaining oneself and enjoying what it was to be human.

Music has always been a big part of my life. My mother sang from one end of the day to the other. My father played various instruments, and there was always a piano in the house. However, it wasn't always that easy to get a piano *into* the house. It seemed we always lived on the third or fourth floor of an apartment building. The pianos had to be hoisted up from the street by pulleys attached to the roof or were carried up flight after flight of steps by the moving men. Having a piano in the home has followed me to this day. Wherever I live, I make sure there is a piano.

VC: After you finished your public school education, you attended Cooper Union Art School. Please tell us how going to that school influenced your development as an artist and writer.

AB: Cooper Union is one of the few remaining private colleges that is tuition-free if you get past the entrance examinations. It is a school of art and engineering. I took exams for the art program and was one of the fifty accepted for the day school; at that time it also had a night school. For part of the examination we did an exercise in drawing. We also brought clay to do an exercise in sculpture. Then we were given an architectural problem. On the basis of our responses to those exercises, they chose who would be allowed to attend. I simply loved it at the school and learned a great deal about art, but I was drafted into the Army during my third year and served in World War II. I was in a segregated group in the transportation corps, a port battalion. We worked on the docks and were involved in the amphibious operations which were invented for the surprise landing on D-day at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France.

When I came home I completed my work at Cooper Union and then decided, because of the effects of the war, that I would study philosophy to see if I could work out some of the questions that had come up through that experience. I registered as an undergraduate at Columbia University and did a second undergraduate program, this time in philosophy. During those years of study my friends said, "How can you do this? You are a painter and writer!" I knew I had to do it. There were many things that I just couldn't answer for myself and couldn't work out in my art and writing. I think what I was going through happens to many people with war experience. When I graduated, I got on a boat and left for Europe and Aix-en-Provence in southern France. I loved it there because I could spend most of the day painting. At that time the center of art was Paris, but I wanted to paint in a small town. I was on the GI Bill and was registered at the University of Aix-Marseille. Even though Aix-en-Provence did not have an art school, I got permission to study philosophy at the university and paint on my own. Aix-en-Provence was and still is a beautiful place. I spent three years there trying to get some sense of my work as an artist. I finally came back home, but about a year later I left again, this time on a Fulbright Scholarship in Freiburg-im-Breisgau in the southern part of Germany. I again went to a small town because I wanted to be a painter among people doing other things. I'm curious about what people do, and I like to bring other people into what I do in my art and writing. I'm very interested in people who are involved in other pursuits, and it is easier to meet such people in small towns. I also used that time in Germany to develop my craft.

VC: As you developed during this schooling and travel, was there much of a separation between your work as a painter and your work as a writer?

AB: No, there really wasn't. I have tried to integrate everything I do as a painter and writer. I can't tell what is feeding into what as I'm going along. This was also true during my schooling. I really don't like to put things into closed-off categories. Out of my love for painting, writing has opened up for me. Artists have always been drawn to texts and have drawn from texts. They see images in these works and use them in their painting. It seems just natural to me that my book work would grow out of my art. My writing grew out of a desire to accompany my illustrations with my own words. The poetry has come about in writing because poetry is at my center as a human being. Most of my reading has been in that area. I've always loved the work of the English and American poets and also poets of other countries in translation or as I learned their languages.

VC: As you were developing as a poet, who were your poetic heroes and heroines?

AB: As a youngster, I had favorite poets from the Mother Goose poems to the childhood poems of Robert Louis Stevenson, Eugene Field, and Christina Rossetti. Later I discovered black poets who were not included in those books: Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Eloise Greenfield . . . These all have been meaningful to me because I found that one has different needs, and different poets speak to different needs at different times. At certain times of my life, certain times of the day, certain times of an emotion, one poet or another would work best. Poetry has always been an area of reading that I have enjoyed.

VC: When did you first start writing poetry?

AB: I have always written poetry. That was a part of schooling, and it was work I did on my own later. However, I never wrote poetry for publication. Later, when I was working with the African folktales, people were always asking me for a book of my own poems because all my programs about the folktales began with my readings of poetry. I would tell them that my poetry was in my stories. I retold the African folktales by using the devices of poetry. When searching for the sound of the voice in the printed word, I use the devices of poetry directly in each story to open the ears so that readers will be aware of the storyteller as they are reading silently. As you read my stories, I think you will note the poetic devices at work. Close rhyme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia, for example, are all devices that are common in my storytelling. Finally, after years of pressure from others, I did *Sing to the Sun*. That was my first published book of poems, and I'm proud that it was granted the 1993 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award as the outstanding book of poetry for young people in 1992. Most of the poems in *Sing to the Sun* were set in Antigua in the West Indies, and as a result they have a tropical setting. I did a great deal of the notes and sketches while there and finished the poems here in Maine.

VC: Tell us about your own process of composing.

AB: I always have a little notebook with me because the ideas for my writings come at any time. For example, one evening I was sitting on the veranda at our family home in Antigua. From this veranda I looked across the bay and saw on the hillside all the little lights of the villages. These lights made long lines as they reflected across the water before me. I looked up from that reflection and there was the full moon just as it was reaching a cloud. The poem "Full Moon" in *Sing to the Sun* comes directly from observing that very special moment. I took out my notebook and worked on the poem right then. Another time I was taking a walk and ran into a neighbor on the island. She is a woman in her eighties. It was a very windy day, and she was having a difficult time walking. She said to me, "I told the wind not to blow so hard." She was so sweet; it was like a child speaking. That experience then became "The Hurricane." In that poem I wrote, "I cried to the wind,/ 'Don't blow so hard!/ You've knocked down my sister.'" Another day I heard a child ask some of the questions that appear in "Big Questions." Children are very curious about the world. I heard this child ask, "Dad, before you and Mom got married, did me and my sisters live all alone by ourselves?" This question might be of little interest to a casual listener, but to the writer it becomes a focus for creativity. I get ideas from everything around me. Writers learn to use material that comes from everyday life.

VC: Do you have a special place where you prefer to write?

AB: Most of my work is done at home, in Maine, but I still travel quite often to Antigua and do some of my drawing and writing while there. When I was in my twenties I became curious about where my parents had been born. I went to visit and loved Antigua. I persuaded my parents to retire there, and they built a family home where all of us now stay when we visit. Today I live in a studio on an island off the coast of Maine. This island is just below Nova Scotia, off of Arcadia National Park. When I retired from teaching at Dartmouth, I decided rather than living in New York I'd make my home on this little island where I had always spent summers. My whole house here is a connected group of studios. During the winter I paint indoors in one section. This is my painting studio where I do the illustrations for my books. I have a desk downstairs where I can work on the stories and poems. I also have an area where I can work on the things I pick up on the beach. Then I have an area where I do my correspondence. With this structure, I don't have to move anything to work on something else.

VC: For *Sing to the Sun* you wrote the poems and drew the beautiful illustrations. Please tell us your philosophy related to blending illustrative material and print.

AB: These poems were mainly developed in the West Indies. In "Mama's Bouquets" I tell about something dear to my mother. She always cut flowers and set them in the rooms of our home. "Leaving" is a product of direct experience. My mother always came to the airport to see us off. She stood at the gate and would not leave until the plane had disappeared. "Village Voices" came about after I heard a group of people singing. I put this experience into that poem. The "Vine Leaves" poem was a play with language and motif. Poems are shaped from direct observation, memory, imagination, or combinations of these elements.

The paintings for *Sing to the Sun* stem from a series of watercolors I've been doing over the past fifteen years. As I was developing the poems, I would go through the watercolors and select ones that were closest to the theme or that I felt would best partner the poem. I tried not to be too literal in the illustrations. Then I would develop and enhance the illustration that you now see in the book.

VC: In most cases, how do you decide upon this "partnering" of poem and painting?

AB: I use the word "partnering" because I'd like to feel that my illustrations and text go hand in hand. You'll notice in my different books I vary my approach in terms of how I want to partner each text. Some of my African folktale illustrations are based on my studies of African sculpture, masks, and rock paintings. They have a different feeling than those created by the brown crayon pencil drawings found in *The Cat's Purr* (1985), the brush paintings of *The Dancing Granny* (1977), or the tempera paintings of *What a Morning* (1987). Once the approach is chosen, each book remains consistent throughout with that style of illustration.

VC: Your study of African art is reflected in the illustrations in *Sing to the Sun,* and in turn these illustrations enrich the beautiful lines of poetry.

AB: While working with the African folktales and doing my studies and research, I loved to absorb myself in the cultures of Africa and the contributions to art there. These studies have been extensive. My interest in African art intensified when I went to the Cooper Union and studied the art of different cultures of the world. Also, when I was a child, the Natural History Museum in New York had an extensive collection of African art, and I loved going to look at and study it. But in my work the art can no longer be labeled Zulu or Ashanti or whatever. It becomes Ashley Bryan. I don't use the art of any one group in any so-called authentic way; I am using the arts of all the groups as they filter through me and become a part of the finished work. They all play a part because I am continually looking at African fabrics, sculpture, and masks and listening to the music.

VC: A hallmark of your poetry is the use of music to touch the reader. At times this music comes from the musical rhythm and sound effects found within the lines of a poem ("Do Good" and "Good Flower Blues"). At other times, references to music, and especially to jazz, serve to build powerful images ("The Blackbirds' Party" and "My Dad," all from *Sing to the Sun*).

AB: To me, music is very important in poetry. I believe that poetry lives at the heart of the wonder and mystery of language. We take language for granted. We are speaking now and not giving a thought to the miracle that we are communicating and understanding each other. The poet never accepts language in a way where it is not thought about deeply. The language and what words can mean and do is the challenge. So when writing, I think about what the words do and how they bring the sounds alive to the ear. I seek out in language words that will open up the vitality of sound and voice to those words you see on the printed page. I want them to be as active as the experience of hearing. I would like the reader to be shaken out of the doldrums of just decoding and for the work to become alive, meaningful. I attempt to make this happen in many ways in my poems, but I especially strive for it through the use of spoken music in the lines.

VC: Your poem "The Artist" (from *Sing to the Sun*) illustrates another hallmark of your work as a poet: the creation of vivid characters in the lines. You often choose to make these characters the focal point of your work.

AB: First of all, I draw from those in my own family as much as possible. In that sense, the characters in the poems are drawn from life. Sometimes my characters are composites of those I meet in the community, on the beach, or as I travel. I will often use phrases and expressions that come from these people. There is generally an interaction between what I do know directly and what I imagine about people. I have to combine both to make it work as it is written. As an artist, I have to figure out how I can give characters a dimension that will make them real and bring them to life. These characters are vital in the development of voice in the lines.

VC: How close is "The Artist" to how you view yourself as an artist and poet?

AB: People have said to me that it appears autobiographical. When they read it they have said it captures the real me. I really didn't write it as an autobiographical poem. I was writing it while thinking of all people who are making something of anything that is at hand and finding a way of deepening experience and being able to survive through that experience. That could be anyone, not just a person writing with a pencil, painting with a brush, or creating music. There is an old proverb which says, "The artist is not a special kind of person; every person is a special kind of artist." I like to see each person as an artist. So when I wrote this poem, I was first thinking of the artist in each one of us.

VC: In terms of tone, your poems have a soft, even cadence. The language you employ is rich in imagery, yet it is free and conversational.

AB: I think my poems vary in vocal range and rhythm to meet the needs of each theme. That comes about by going over and over a poem and trying to feel the character of voice in the poem. I think it is also because when I was young, I heard poetry performed well. Through this my silent reading was deeply enriched, and I have tried to pass this along in my own poems. When musicians look at a score, they can hear the music. In some ways I can do this with lines of poetry. I can hear the voice within.

VC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

AB: The art of listening to poetry is so rare that poetry remains at the bottom of the ladder in literature for most people. That is very sad. We do not have performers of poetry. In elementary school, when I was growing up, we were introduced to poetry through performance, and I wish more of this would be done today. We were given a month to work on the poem we had selected. Then we would recite that poem for the class. We would then select speakers to recite their poems in assemblies each week in the school auditorium. This was also practiced in the junior high school. Through this activity we learned to listen to the sound of the voice in poetry. I've always related to poetry in that way. I believe poetry should be performed by and for children and adults as well. They have to have some experience in hearing poetry to make sense of it when it is read silently. The miracle is that so many people love poetry, and when I ask them if they have ever heard performances of the English and American poets, they say they have not. The fact that they still love poetry in spite of their limited experience of performance is marvelous and something of a surprise to me. Evidently, they have been able to add voice and excitement to the page; they have been able to hear the poem. Not many people can do that, if they haven't heard poetry performed well. In many ways this is like a musician never hearing songs sung but learning to love them only from sight-reading the music. I'm afraid this is the way poetry is generally known. I make a point in all the programs I do of beginning with a performance of reading from poetry written by African American poets. In that way I'm giving the audience a sense of the sound of the voice in the printed word. That is the heart of everything I share with people. I want them to feel that the printed word is speaking directly to them. If they listen to the sound of the voice, then the meaning lives with them. I could open a book and read a poem cold to an audience, but I would no more do that than a singer would open a book to a song he or she had never practiced and sing it to an audience. There is such a difference between being able to read and being able to feel how a voice should be interpreted or expressed. In the same fashion, a poem will never be read twice the same way any more than a singer will sing a song twice exactly the same way. You might have direction and lead, but there are always other things that come into each performance.

When I am with teachers, I tell them it is unfair ever to call upon a child to read a poem cold. We call upon children to read aloud to test their reading skills. Often, because they haven't had a chance to practice what they are going to read, this experience frustrates and embarrasses them, and they associate that frustration with books. Give the readers a month, as I had when I was a child, and at recitation time there will no longer be poor readers, middle readers, and good readers. Everyone will be on the same level because of the practice involved. All can work cooperatively because students can be told to consult the teacher or others if they don't understand a word or a meaning or a pronunciation. At the same time, another thing can happen if a child is given time to find a way to express the words in a poem. If a child learns to speak effectively from the printed word, he or she may have that "click" that will open up all reading. Then the sound of the voice comes through to give printed words meaning. I express these ideas to teachers as another means of opening up reading. This is also the way I would like to see my own poems, and the poems of others, introduced to young readers.

VC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

AB: I have two books coming out in 1994. In one I have re-illustrated *Christmas Gif': Black Celebrations of Christmas.* It has long been out of print, and I have re-illustrated it in linoleum block prints. This book is being published by William Morrow. The other book is an African folktale I have retold and illustrated. It is *The Story of Lightning and Thunder.* It will be published by Atheneum. I'm continually working on the African folktales because it takes me many years to find the voice for a single story. They are always in different stages of realization. At the same time, I am always working on ideas for pictures, but I don't do any final pictures for a book until I have the galleys and know just where they will fit into the book. To work on a completed picture that will not fall in the right place in a book would not make sense. I am also very interested in spirituals. There are over a thousand of these songs which have been collected since the Civil War. So I'm always writing down songs that might appear in the next collection. I have done five books of spirituals to date. I am also working on poetry projects. Everything takes time.

VC: Do you have a special message to pass along to your readers?

AB: Find the pleasure and joy in reading, because so much of education is involved in reading. If you can top that center, then you are soaring and flying!

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Jane Yolen

Jane Yolen grew up surrounded by writers. Her father was a journalist who wrote nonfiction books and screenplays. Her mother created and sold crossword puzzles and double acrostics. Her brother became a journalist. Even her parents' closest friends were writers. It isn't surprising, then, that from this environment grew one of the more talented and prolific writers of stories and poems for children and young adults. Yolen says she is sure she became a writer and editor because, in her home, "from early on the whole writing process was valued."

However, environment isn't always enough. To become a full-time writer, often one must have the discipline to persevere. This has certainly been the case for Yolen. She received over a hundred "rejection slips" for poems she submitted while in college before one was selected for publication. But Yolen had faith in herself and in her writing, so she kept to her regimen of writing something each day. Today, she has published over a hundred books for young readers, has received dozens of awards for her writing, and has over forty more books under contract. To young writers she offers this advice: "Read, read, read, write, write, write, and have faith in what you do."

As a poet, Yolen strives for language that will present for young readers new ways of looking at the world. In doing so, her poetry is characterized by startling comparisons that are both revealing and entertaining. Through these descriptions, she hopes readers will be able to open their imaginations and learn more about themselves and the world in which they live.

Today, Jane Yolen lives in Hatfield, Massachusetts.

VC: Please tell us about your childhood and how you developed as a writer.

JY: I grew up in a family of readers and writers. My parents modeled reading and writing because my father was a journalist and then a publicity and public relations person. He was a good writer who wrote articles and a couple of nonfiction books. He also spent a good deal of time with other writers; that was his job. He wrote a couple of screenplays as well. At one point my father owned an independent screen company. My mother was a failed short story writer who sold only one short story in her life, but she wrote all the time. She was also a maker of crossword puzzles and double acrostics, which she sold professionally. When I think of my mother, I think of her sitting in her chair reading because

Photo: Jason Stemple

that was what she did all the time. So, the printed word was always very important in my family. My brother is a journalist, and I became a writer and editor. I'm sure we became writers because from early on the whole writing process was valued.

It also seemed that all of my parents' friends were writers. Those who would come to the house and have dinner with us were all well-known published writers, like Cornelius Ryan who wrote *The Longest Day*, and Will Oursler who wrote *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. For a long time my assumption was that when you grew up, you became a writer because all the grown-ups I knew were writers. I thought that people were teachers and dentists and other things as well, but that all adults wrote books because that was clearly in my experience. I was eight or nine before I realized that wasn't true.

VC: What were your hobbies and favorite activities when you were a child?

JY: I wrote all the time. When we lived in an apartment house in New York City, my brother and I put together half a dozen issues of a newspaper about things that happened at 370 Central Park West. We would go and interview our neighbors and write down little stories. My mother typed these stories for us and made carbon copies, and then my brother and I sold them to the same neighbors.

I also spent a lot of time going to the Museum of Natural History. It was one of the places I dearly loved. We were only about ten blocks away from that. During the summer my brother and I went to camp or to Virginia to stay with our grandparents. There were always things going on because my parents had interesting friends. I read often today of writers who were brutalized by their parents or grew up in terrible circumstances. I am always shocked by these stories because my childhood was so wonderful.

VC: What were your favorite subjects in school? Were they also related to writing?

JY: I loved English and liked geography and history. I didn't like math at all and wasn't very good at it. I have absolutely no ability to understand spatial relationships. To this day if I look at a floor plan, I can't tell what it is going to look like. In school I loved to write songs and little poems. I can't remember if it was sixth or seventh grade, but we were supposed to write a report on the cities and towns of New York and what each manufactured. I wrote mine in rhyme. I got a lot of good feedback from teachers on my writing and my writing skills.

VC: Were these teachers all supportive?

JY: Yes, all the way through high school. In high school I had my first poem published in the school literary magazine, but I also received a Scholastic Award and was published in some sort of special little magazine that Scholastic put out at the time. It was not a terribly good poem, but it was very heartfelt. I also won the "I Speak for Democracy" contest at our high school, and then came in second place at our regional competition.

Also, all of my family members were very supportive at this time. My father's side of the family is full of incredible storytellers. They all tell wonderful stories, but I must admit that, until around 1966, I thought that people who wrote fiction were another breed of cattle entirely. I knew at the time that I was a poet because I had been a poet from childhood. I also knew I could write nonfiction, but I didn't know if I could write fiction. That was the last thing that developed in me as a writer.

I also read all the time, and I think that as a writer you are influenced by what you read. I was one of those kids who was always reading. I would read one or two books a day, and I read everything. I loved horse stories and adventure stories. *Treasure Island* was a favorite of mine. I loved fantasy stories and fairy tales, and when I ran out of my own books I would go into my parents' library and read what they had there. When I was ten or eleven I discovered their copy of Thomas Mann's *Joseph in Egypt*, a two-volume set which I don't think I fully understood. However, I was astonished by those books. Then, on my thirteenth birthday I was given a compete collection of O. Henry stories and the complete Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In my family we would always place birthday presents at the foot of the bed so that the person could open them right away before the rest of the family got up. I woke up at about three in the morning, and by the time the rest of the family arose I had finished all the O. Henry stories, something like eleven hundred pages. I absolutely galloped through those stories.

VC: Who were other writers who influenced you as you developed as a writer?

JY: I think probably the writers who influenced me the most over the long haul were Rudyard Kipling, James Thurber, who was also a friend of my father's, and Isak Dinesen. My poetic heroes were William Butler Yeats, Kipling, Dylan Thomas, and John Donne.

VC: You mentioned earlier about the poem you had published while you were in high school. After this, how did your professional publishing career come about?

JY: In college I was writing all the time and writing for the college literary magazine, but it wasn't until my junior year that I started sending poems out to all the places poets should send them. I got them back in a hurry. As a matter of fact, I received 113 rejection slips, which I pasted on my wall. In with these I also got a letter from John Ciardi saying I was very good, but if I were a pianist, we have to say I wasn't quite up to concert rank yet. Still, he encouraged me to keep trying. Then one day I got a letter from a very small literary magazine that accepted one of my poems. I have forgotten the name of that magazine, but that was the real start for me. I was published, and the bug really bit at that point.

I didn't place any other poems until I was out of college. Then I started selling poetry to the *Chicago Jewish Forum* and some literary magazines. Eventually, after about two or three years, I got out of adult poetry entirely because I was very disappointed and discouraged. By then I was selling children's books. It wasn't until years later that I started writing poems, again, first children's poems, then adult poems.

VC: Tell us about your own process of composing. How do you work as a writer?

JY: Most of the time I need to be working on the typewriter. I don't use a computer, even though my husband is a professor of computer science. I use a typewriter because I can't write poetry in longhand. For some reason I need to see what it looks like in print. I usually put something on a single piece of paper, and then I will scribble over it and cross it out and use different colored pens until the piece gets so that I can barely read it. Finally, I retype the whole thing. I've discovered over the years that very often my first poetic impulse is the best. In other words, often I have a single line that I work over and work over, but I end up going back to the original line or something very close to it. However, that doesn't stop me from doing my usual scratching out and redoing because there's always a chance a better, more exact word, the one that the whole poem is going to turn on, is just around the corner.

VC: Do you have a special place you prefer to do your writing?

JY: I have the entire attic; it has been turned into my writing room. I call it the "aerie" because it's my little eagle's nest. I also call it the McDowell Colony because I've never been to any of those writers' colonies, and this is my own personal one. In the beginning, because I had small children, I couldn't afford to go to any of them. Now that my children are grown, I don't need to go to any of them because I have this enormous attic.

VC: Could you illustrate your work as a writer by giving us an anecdote related to the writing of one of your poetry books?

JY: *Bird Watch* (1990) has an interesting story behind it. The poems in that collection were written over a period of about five years. I sent the collection to six or eight different publishers, all of whom turned it down. And these were my regular publishers! Someone said, "Oh, I don't know. Is this an adult book? Is it a children's book?" Some people said they had just done a book of poems about birds and couldn't do another one. Someone else said, "These poems are just too quiet. Kids don't like this kind of poetry; they want funny poetry." I got lots of excuses, but then Pat Gauch of Philomel Books decided to take it. We tried to figure out who could do the artwork, and I suggested Ted Lewin. He's not only a favorite illustrator of mine but also the only person in the entire universe who has illustrated a book by both my husband and me. The insights into many of the poems in this collection were not mine; they were my husband's because he is the real birder in the family. I just listened many times to him when he was describing birds or talking about them. The poem about the ducks, "Calligraphy," was really inspired by something he wrote in an essay on signs of spring. In that piece he talked about the calligraphy of ducks, and I just used that and made it into a poem. So, I think of that book as much as his as mine.

VC: Your poetry is characterized by rich imagery and magnificent sound effects. In *Bird Watch,* for example, the reader can be awed by such delightful images as the "V" formation of the geese in "Bird Watcher," the robin as puffed up as "a tag-team wrestler" in "First Robin," and the birds on the electric wires resembling "scattered notes on lines of music" in "Song/Birds." These images are complemented by sound effects such as the jackhammer-like "ratatatatat" of the woodpecker in "Woodpecker" and the squawk of the newborn birds in "Nestlings." As a result, each poem becomes a powerful combination of sight and sound.

JY: One of the things poetry does best is to make you look at something in a new light, to make you see something a new way. I try to approach my poems for children in that way. I try to find something that will strike them as a new way of looking at the subject, say, a robin pulling up a worm or a woodpecker hammering on a tree. I just got back from reading some of my poetry to children at the Hitchcock Center, an outdoor education center nearby. I read from *Bird Watch*, and the two poems the children liked best were "Swan" and "Woodpecker." The children said they liked "Swan" because the key to that poem is the image of how beautifully and smoothly the elegant swan moves along in the water while those clumsy-looking feet are working away unseen underneath. They also liked the succession of images and sounds in "Woodpecker." Through the images, whether they were about the dentist picking at your teeth, the park attendant picking up litter, or the man with the jackhammer, they could say, "Oh, it's like that." And those associations would let them open their own imaginations.

VC: On the last page of *Bird Watch* you present information about the birds found in the collection. How did you come up with the idea of presenting this glossary-like section?

JY: It wasn't my idea; it was my editor's, because there were a couple of references she wasn't sure of. For example, she wanted to know why in "Storm Bringer" the birds looked like farmers counting their crops. I said it was because they have on what looks like little bib overalls. When I started to explain these things to her, she said that maybe we needed to tell people a little more about the different birds. So, we added the information and hoped that anyone working with these poems might want to go a little further and have children find even more information in the encyclopedia.

VC: *Ring of Earth: A Child's Book of Seasons* (1986) is a view of the cyclical nature of life and the seasons. Through poems about a weasel, a spring peeper, a dragonfly, and a goose, young readers can journey through the majesty of nature.

JY: Originally, I wrote the goose poem and tried to sell it as a single picture book, but it got turned down by a number of publishers. I then sent it to Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and my editor there suggested I write a poem for each of the seasons. The first poem was already in the voice of the goose; I decided the others should be in the voices of animals or insects that represented the other seasons. The "Winter Song of the Weasel" was an easy decision because a weasel changes colors and goes into a winter coat that replicates winter on its own hide. The "Song of the Spring Peeper" was also a natural because of the nature of the peeper. But figuring out what I wanted to do for the summer voice was very difficult. I wanted a creature that would seem as brief as summer seems to humans. That is how I came to the dragonfly as the voice of the poem. Also, dragonflies are like moving stained-glass windows. When the sun moves past a stained-glass window, the window takes on a kind of life of its own; that is a little bit of what I was seeing in the stained-glass wings of the dragonfly.

VC: Dinosaur Dances (1990) is a collection of very humorous poems. Here we find dinosaurs square dancing (in "Square Dance"), playing rock music (in "Dinosaur Hard Rock Band"), and dancing a wild, dangerous hula (in "Ms. A. Hulas"). Please tell us how this delightful collection came about.

JY: When my sons were growing up, they were crazy about dinosaurs. I even embroidered them each dinosaur pillows. I remember that the youngest, Jason, had problems pronouncing the letter *s* and was always talking about "Tyrannothaurth Recth." I thought his pronunciation of that beast's name was really funny. When they were older, I remembered how much the children had enjoyed reading about and talking about dinosaurs, so I started writing some dinosaur poems. I love writing funny poems, and before I knew it these just came tumbling out. They came so fast I wrote all of the poems in *Dinosaur Dances* in just about six weeks. I had a great time putting those together. I think my favorite line from that collection is "Goodness gracious,/ It's Cretaceous/ Party time again!" (from "Dinosaur Dances"). I even had a T-shirt made with that line and illustrated with two dancing dinosaurs.

VC: In *Dragon Night and Other Lullabies* (1980) we also find another characteristic of your writings: a delicate balance of the real and the fantastic. Here, the real world is seen in poems like "Whale's Lullaby" and "Father Wolf's Midnight Song." In contrast to these, the fantastic is presented in poems like "Dragon Night" and "Mermaid's Lullaby."

JY: That is a very odd collection, and in some ways it is my favorite, but it didn't sell very well at all. I think one of the problems was that it *was* a funny balance between what was real and what was not. For example, the poem about the owl, "Mother Owl's Song," was based upon my study of owls; my husband and I have done a good deal of owling, so I know owls pretty well. In contrast, the poems about the mermaid, the troll, and the dragon come out of folklore. So, the collection is really an assortment of the real and imaginary.

I also find it interesting that a couple of poems from this collection are my most reprinted poems. "Mother Cat's Purr" has been reprinted in at least fifteen volumes. "Grandpa Bear's Lullaby" has also been reprinted everywhere. Both poems are very sentimental and easy. Plus, bears and cats are very popular with children. However, in my opinion, the two best poems in the book, "Mother Owl's Song" and "Wild Child's Lament," haven't been reprinted anywhere. That just seems very odd to me.

VC: One of the most interesting collections of poetry for children is *Street Rhymes around the World* (1992). Here you have collected popular rhymes from seventeen different lands, with each presented through the original language and an English language translation. As you mention in the introduction to this collection, these poems when read together magnify the universality of childhood experiences. How did this collection come about?

JY: One evening while I was having dinner with representatives from Boyds Mills Press, the idea for the book was brought up. One of their editors, Bee Cullinan, said that we could have people from each of the countries illustrate each of the rhymes. That sounded wonderful but awfully expensive and outlandishly difficult to me. They told me not to worry about the expense and gave me the green light, so I went out and found poems from all of the countries, and they found illustrators for every single country represented in the book. Boyds Mills Press has great contacts around the world, so it wasn't that difficult for them to find the illustrators. Along the same lines, I have finished another book like this that will be out next spring. It will be called *Sleep Rhymes around the World* (1994). I think it is quite spectacular because we used different countries than we used in *Street Rhymes*.

VC: You have written over one hundred books for children and have been granted many awards for your writings. From this perspective, what advice have you for young writers, especially those interested in writing poetry?

JY: I always tell kids that if they want to be writers, they have to be readers. You have to read, read, read all the time. Also, don't read just what you want to write. In other words, if you want to write poetry, don't read just poetry. Read everything so you expand your background and knowledge of everything. Also, you have to write something every single day. You don't have to write a great poem every day, but you do need to write something, because writing is a muscle that needs to be exercised. I used to be a dancer, and if I didn't do my barre work every day, I would be terribly stiff and nothing would move properly the days after. It is the same with writing poetry. The third thing is that you cannot let other people's opinions discourage you. You should listen to their comments in case they have something important to tell you, but you shouldn't let them discourage you. All along the way there are people who can both encourage and discourage you. These may be teachers, parents, loved ones, editors, critics, reviewers. But if you are going to make it as a poet or any kind of writer, you have to write because *you* know you have something to say—not because somebody tells you that you do. So, read, read, read, write, write, write, and have faith in what you do.

VC: How would you like to see your poetry introduced to young readers?

JY: Really, I just want them to read the poems. I don't want my poems to be analyzed so that they become nothing more than grounds for metaphor hunts. Things like metaphors are there, but I tell kids I don't write a poem saying, "Ha. Now it's time for a metaphor." My poems speak *from* the heart and I want them to speak *to* the heart. We shouldn't take poems apart until we have learned to love them. This is especially important because everyone who reads a poem reads it differently from the next person who reads it. When I write, I strive to write the best poem I know how. I hope that the reader enjoys it. They can love it or they can hate it. I just hope they have some type of response to it.

VC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

JY: I have about forty-five books under contract now. A great number of these are books of poetry. One, *What Rhymes with Moon* (1993), is a book of moon poems. I also have a book of poems about cats and dogs called *Raining Cats and Dogs* (1993). I wrote a book of angel poems, which will be called *Among Angels* (1994), with Nancy Willard. And, I am also working on a book called *Water Music* (1994), which is a book of poems about water. So, there is plenty of poetry on my horizon.

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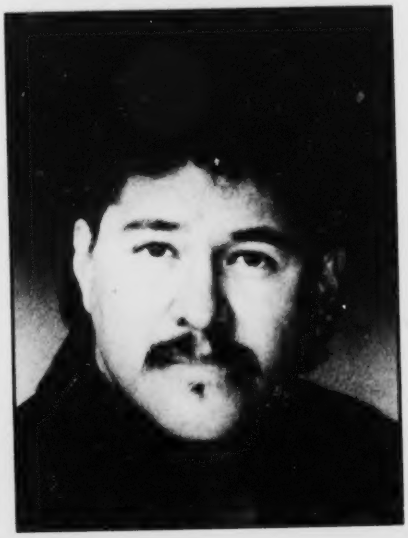
Luis J. Rodriguez

Before settling into his writing career, Luis Rodriguez held such jobs as carpenter, smelter, and blast furnace operator. These jobs, while financially rewarding, left him feeling emotionally empty at the end of each day. At the same time, his desire to write burned as hot as the furnaces he stoked in the foundry. He finally decided to trade the immediate financial security provided by industry for a chance to pursue a dream, which has become reality. His first book of poetry, Poems Across the Pavement *(1989), won the 1989 Poetry Center National Book Award of San Francisco State University.* The Concrete River *(1991), his second book of poetry, was granted the 1991 PEN West/Josephine Miles Award for Literary Excellence. His poetry, through rich detail, captures the stark realism of contemporary life to the quiet dignity of characters who touch our everyday lives. He writes especially for an older audience searching for personal values and identity.*

Rodriguez likens his work as a writer to the work of a sculptor: He begins with a mass of thoughts and whittles them down into everyday experiences. He hopes the end result will be words and images that will "explode in the minds of readers."

Luis Rodriguez lives today with his wife, Maria, and three children in Chicago, Illinois, where he also serves as editor and publisher of Tia Chucha Press.



JC: I understand your family moved quite often when you were younger. Where were some of the places you lived?

LR: I was born in El Paso, Texas, but we lived in Juarez, Mexico, right across the border. We never actually lived in El Paso. It was just the thing for Mexican families to have American kids. When I was two years old we moved from Juarez to Watts in South Central Los Angeles. We lived in three or four different houses in South Central; there were a number of evictions. My father was always out of work, and money was really tight. When I was about seven, we moved to the San Fernando Valley. My father had gotten a job there, and for a year we were really living it up: a new house, a new car, everything. Then he lost his job again. The family went bankrupt, so we moved with my older sister to a community just out of East Los Angeles. We finally settled in South San Gabriel, and that is where I spent most of my teenage years.

JC: What were you like as a child?

LR: I was a really shy, withdrawn child. I was afraid of everything, but I'm not exactly sure why. I think maybe it was because there was always a lot of tension in the house, a lot of yelling. There were always money problems and too many people living together in places that were too small to hold all of us. My mother did take care of us, but she also had to work to help support the family. She ended up working in the garment industry for many years. More and more I found myself enjoying being by myself. I had a fertile imagination and loved to play by myself with my toys in the backyard wherever we lived. I was a pretty solitary kid.

JC: What subjects did you enjoy in school?

LR: I went to five different elementary schools, including a Catholic school that my mother made us go to during the summer. I didn't go to kindergarten and started first grade speaking nothing but Spanish, which was bad in those days because the schools didn't know what to do with you if you spoke Spanish. Because of the language difference, I ended up spending most of my first grade year playing with building blocks in the corner of the classroom. My brother had it worse in school; they put him in with mentally handicapped children because they thought he was not smart at all. He was very smart, but he couldn't express himself in English. So, I had terrible experiences in school, and it just got worse as time went on because I was so shy and afraid. Teachers yelled at me often because I couldn't understand what they were saying, and they certainly couldn't understand me. I didn't even know enough English to ask if I could go to the restroom. Talk about frustration. I became the ridicule of my classmates. As a result, I don't recall liking school at all. However, I do recall learning to read and liking to read. I don't entirely know why except that through reading I was probably able to enjoy the same type of solace that I found in my solitary play. When I began to learn English, I also watched a lot of TV and listened to the radio. As a result, I started picking up the language pretty quickly. Comic books were also really important to me in trying to learn how to read. I just loved to read and couldn't get enough of books.

JC: Who were the writers who influenced you most as you developed as a reader and writer?

LR: When I was becoming a teenager and was looking for books, I read mainly those from the African American experience—Julius Lester, Malcolm X, and a good number of poets. These were authors I found that I could relate to, so I devoured their books. They really got me going as a reader and writer. However, at that time there weren't really enough of them who were published.

JC: Tell us about your early writing experiences.

LR: I started writing as soon as I started learning English. Looking back, I think my interest in writing began because I loved reading so much. I also had a very fertile imagination. I wrote little stories and vignettes and poems. Every once in a while at school, teachers would see my writings and point out I had something there. A few even said, "Hey, this is pretty good!" This was very encouraging to me. I also think I loved to write because I couldn't think of any other way to express what I was going through both at home and at school. As I got older my writing got better, but my attitude toward school did not. For the most part, I simply hated school. I hated the structure found there. I needed room to be myself, and I wasn't finding any.

When I was fifteen I was writing all the time. I had joined a gang, and as much as I could I wrote down what was happening around me while I was with that gang. When I was about seventeen, around 1972, I showed these writings to a counselor at school who liked them very much. She had someone type them up really nice and submitted them to a contest, the Quinto Sol Chicano Literary Award. This was a very big award for Chicano writers. I think a thousand dollars was the top prize. I came in second and was given an honorable mention. I was also given two hundred and fifty dollars, which was a heck of a lot of money for a young writer. They also took me to Berkeley and introduced me to a group of other writers. It was a very important victory, one that I needed at that time. I wasn't sure where I was going in my life. I had no idea what my future would look like. However, being granted that honorable mention and getting all the publicity that came with it put me on my way to becoming a writer. That completely changed my life.

JC: You held many other jobs before you became a full-time writer. What were some of these jobs, and when did you finally decide to make writing your life's work?

LR: I worked in a steel mill for four years. I was an oiler and a greaser, which meant I oiled and greased all the machines. I also worked in different foundries as a smelter and blast furnace operator. When I was younger I worked in construction; I was a carpenter. I did this from the age of eighteen. Even though I won the poetry award, I couldn't make a living at writing at that time. I was getting ready to get married. I had to work, and the only thing I knew that was out there was industrial and construction work. So, I did both for many years. I finally walked away from a job in a chemical refinery, and I used it as an opportunity to get out of that type of work completely. I walked into the *East Side Sun* newspaper in East Los Angeles and told them I wanted to work. I had been making five to seven hundred dollars a week as a pipe fitter and maintenance mechanic, and the newspaper offered me a hundred dollars a week. I took it. At the newspaper I did just about everything. I was writing, selling ads, doing photography, even sweeping the floors. *This* was what I wanted to do. It was worth it for me, but my family and friends thought I was crazy. I didn't look at it that way; I looked at it as a way of being persistent. I had all these stories and poems in my head, and finally I had a chance to let them out. I couldn't do that while I was working double shifts in the refinery. I had to take a really drastic step in order to become a writer. I have never regretted my decision.

JC: Tell us about your own process of composing.

LR: I am now a full-time poet, writer, and journalist, so writing is now an occupation. I have worked so many jobs that it was easy for me to set up a structure for my work as a writer. First, I get up in the morning and prepare my coffee; I have to do that. Then I sit down in front of my computer and just compose away. This is the best way for me. I used to get up to write really early in the morning because I had small children around the house to take care of and I was working in factory jobs that required me to be away from home all day. Other times I would try to squeeze in a few hours of writing at night, but that is really not a good way to write. Writing on an irregular schedule like that made it too easy to get off the track and forget what I was going to say. Now I'm more focused. I treat writing as my job. I work mainly from 9:00 A.M. when I drop my four year old off at school until late afternoon. I'm usually home alone now, so I'm not interrupted as I write. If I'm really into something and have to write in the evening, I will, but I prefer to stop before supper. Being able to live and write this way is a great luxury. I am very grateful for this freedom.

As a writer, I am pretty much a creature of habit. I keep a journal, and if I'm out drinking coffee or on a trip I jot down ideas as they come to me. I work from these ideas. They become the seeds for my writing. When I'm ready to write, I look through the list of ideas until I find one I want to deal with. Sometimes I'll add a couple of lines I feel are important and powerful. Other times I'll just jot more notes, but my penmanship is so bad I can't flesh out my stories and poems in longhand. Once I feel I have enough information to get going, I sit in front of my computer and write everything I can think of around this idea. I just let myself go, and quite often this gets to be a lot of writing. I find this is where the poetry starts coming through. I do a huge amount of writing, then I begin to whittle it down the way a sculpture is whittled down. It is like I have this big piece of clay and whittle it down until I find the actual piece I want to bring out. This is where I find the poem. Sometimes I write two or three poems out of the same idea. However, the whole process begins with the notes. This particular approach now seems best for me.

JC: In terms of specific features of your work, a hallmark of your poetry is a tightly woven narrative structure. Rather than sharing just an isolated vignette related to an experience, as many contemporary poets choose to do, you most often provide a panoramic view of a thought or experience.

LR: I try to make my poetry as detailed as possible, but I want this detail to come from choosing just the right words—not from loading up the lines with so many words the reader gets lost in the description. In a sense, I work to condense my writing so that the words that end up in each line trigger many thoughts and feelings. I want words that explode in the minds of the readers. What I mean to say is that in my poetry, much of what the lines express is more than just what appears on the surface; the lines are like the tip of an iceberg. For example, in "Running to America" (from *Poems Across the Pavement*) there are two lines: "A hungry people/Have no country." It is just two lines, but if you think about it, these people are hungry for many things: food, freedom, a place to live, a better life. I try to convey as much as I can in each line, so in my poetry you will find much condensed language and condensed meaning. I do all this writing and then begin to find a way to bring out the poem and put it into a poetic form. I'm always striving to find the words and the best form and shape to express all of this.

JC: In your poetry you also create powerful characters who give life to the lines. Very few poets are able to create characters like those found in "Tia Chucha," "The Coldest Day," and "Heavy Tells a Story" (all from *The Concrete River*).

LR: If you listen and pay attention to people around you, you will find these characters. This has been the case for me. I tell this to young people all the time. I think everybody probably has a character like Tia Chucha somewhere in their lives. There is also probably a rooster or crazy animal somewhere in your life, like the one in my poem called "The Rooster Who Thought He Was a Dog" (from *The Concrete River*). These are people and things all around us, and young readers need to see that. In my poetry I try to bring to life the characters I knew when I was growing up. I also draw from my family and the people I know in my neighborhood. I think this is why my characters are so vivid.

JC: Another characteristic of your work is stark realism. The experiences in your poems are not watered down or made sweet at the end. You present experiences as they happen in families, with no whitewash or apologies given.

LR: When I was younger, I was very good about expressing what was going on around me. It was both a blessing and a curse that I could capture the realism that was a part of my life. Today, some people find this realism hard to deal with. As many writers get older they begin to remove themselves, in their writing, from the real world. They stop writing about things that are meaningful to them and to others. They begin to write in abstractions and move into areas they really know nothing about. I haven't done this. I hope I never do. I strive above all to convey realism, and I'm grateful I can often find those images that are just right to do this. I mentioned that at times this can also be a curse. It is difficult for me to move away from the realism and use more imagination in the poems. A writer should be able to move into other realms and lives once in a while. I really should work on adding more of the imagination. Right now I write about what I know, which is what I have seen. It is real, and it is not always pretty.

JC: Related to this, an underlying message found in your poetry is very clear: Speak out from the mainstream and you may be put down.

LR: I think this is mostly an unconscious thing on my part, but it does have its root in my writing about what I know and have experienced. I recall most of the time being put down or considered strange or people thinking something was wrong with me because of what I was trying to do. Trying to become a writer is a very difficult thing for most people, but it is even more difficult if you have all these other obstacles, such as different skin color, language, or historical prejudices, against you. All these things make it just that much harder. It seems that most people think you are weird if you want to be a writer, and you can't let this bother you. No matter what your circumstances in life, you've got to have the courage to achieve the goals you set for yourself. It won't always be easy, but you *can* do it! In the end, I hope that message comes through in my writing.

JC: Another characteristic of your poetry is that you present such striking comparisons in the lines. These might be described as contrasting or ironic images. Examples would include the girls dancing easily to a repertoire of police sirens in "Night Dancing: Watts 1975–78" or the cooing of a dove after the violence in "Soundtracks" (both from *The Concrete River*).

LR: When I write poetry, I look at words to see how they play against each other. I also study comparisons to create metaphors that will fit a given subject. I also listen for the sound, the musicality of words. If you love the language, as I do, poetry is a wonderful playground. However, some people take the language to extremes, and their poems are totally incomprehensible. They become so in love with words they don't care about meaning. I try to guard against this. I want most of all to convey meaning through the words. I find the best way to do this is to find images which produce ironic connections. I look for combinations of words that will shock or startle the reader into thinking about a subject in a new way. The ironic images force this new way of thinking.

JC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

LR: I think poetry should be used as a bridge to get young people to write themselves. Sometimes poetry is taught like it is really a far-off Emerald City you can't get to. That's terrible. First, I think poets should be seen as normal people who have chosen writing as a focus of their lives. I hope readers say, "Look, here's a guy just like me!" I don't consider myself any better than anyone else as far as all this is concerned. I think basically everyone has these capabilities. Whether or not they use them depends upon many other factors, but I think most young people could get interested in poetry and writing if they could see an example of someone who is just like they are. If they could see someone who grew up under conditions that weren't too good and who had many obstacles but was still able to write poetry and tap into the creative reservoir we all have, then maybe they would get more interested in and involved in writing. They might then say, "Well, I can do this!" So, I would like to see my poetry used more in this way than for someone to set me aside and say, "This is a talented, exceptional human being, and the rest of you, well . . . too bad." I get the sense that this is the way a lot of poetry is taught—as if most people can't understand or ever hope to write it.

Another problem is that most people aren't allowed to develop their own process of writing, especially when it comes to the writing of poetry. If kids don't show strokes of genius right away, many people tell them they are no good. Remember, my own writing was the worst in the world when I was younger. I had no idea of English grammar, was terrible at spelling, and even my penmanship was horrible. Every once in a while I show people my first poems, and they can't believe that I did them. Compared to what I write today, they weren't very good at all. Everybody starts out this way; very few people start off as really great writers. Kids need to know that. Kids also need to know that the ability to write is within their grasp if they want it and are willing to work for it. I hope my poetry will also be used to share these ideas.

JC: What other suggestions do you have for young people who are interested in writing poetry?

LR: The key is persistence. You can't stop writing. Even if you have obstacles put in your way, keep going. As you get older, it becomes even more difficult. A family can pull you away from your writing. So can a job. Also, most jobs where you can work as a writer aren't very lucrative, so you may have to work other jobs at the same time to support yourself and a family. If you want to be a writer and think you'll only get accolades, then you won't be a writer very long. You will get rejection notices from publishers, but you can't take these personally. You should take all the advice you can get and keep learning through it. There is no guaranteed path to take to writing success. All you can do is believe in yourself and keep going.

JC: Related to this, what type of response do you hope for from your readers?

LR: I want my poetry to have an impact. I want it to change their lives, even if it is just a little bit. I don't expect my poetry to change everybody's trajectory in life. However, I realize I have a big responsibility because through my poetry I am interjecting myself into their lives. As a result, I try to be careful how I present myself and the world to my readers. I do want them to feel the emotion I'm trying to convey in the poems. I want them to suspend their reality for a moment and get into what I am about. I want them to connect so that when they finish reading, they become slightly changed human beings.

JC: Regarding your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

LR: Always Running—La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A. (1993; 1994) has just been published; I'm very happy about that. I'm also working on another poetry manuscript. Eventually, I'd like to write screenplays and some fiction. I'd really like to try everything. I hope I never get pigeonholed into one genre. In this country there is a tendency to put people into one corner and say they are poets or journalists and that is all they can do. It seems very few people break away from these genres once they get labeled. That's another reason I'd like to try my hand at everything.

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

LR: If you want to be a writer, there will be a huge bridge between where you are and where you would like to be. There will be obstacles and holes in front of you on this bridge. One of the biggest obstacles will be called rejection. However, if you keep writing you can make it, and don't let anyone tell you that you can't. And I'm not just talking about those who want to become professional writers; I'm also talking about anyone who picks up a pen. All of us have the ability to become good writers if we just put our minds to it. The thing to remember is language is power. The more command we have of language, over our expressiveness, the more powerful we become. This is as true for an individual as it is for a people.

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Deborah Chandra

Deborah Chandra began writing poetry for children while enrolled in a poetry class taught by Myra Cohn Livingston, a person Chandra calls a "once-in-a-lifetime instructor." While in this class, one of her poems was chosen by Livingston for inclusion in an anthology she was assembling. Since that time, Chandra's publishing career has flourished.

For Deborah Chandra, writing poetry is a solitary venture. Rather than depending upon direct observation for inspiration, she relies most often upon her memory of events and experiences. She draws especially upon the events of an exciting childhood: "As I recall, it seemed the world constantly rose up around me with every sort of magnificence." This is a feeling she continues to share with readers of her poetry. The speakers of her poems are inquisitive and curious about the interconnectedness of everyday events. As a result, the world presented in her poetry is a place just waiting to be explored.

Chandra's poetry is also enriched by striking personification. She describes personification as not just a poetic device but also a way of thinking, one that comes naturally to her. As a result, animals and objects found within her poems end up seeming like old friends.

Deborah Chandra lives today in Altadena, California.

JC: Please tell us about your childhood.

DC: I grew up in a small town called Monrovia, in California. My family consisted of my parents, my older sister, Rachel, and myself. What I remember strongly about my childhood is that I loved being outside and spent as much time as I possibly could there. My early years were very simple, and I was granted a good amount of freedom by my parents. My family was also close, and we did many things together. For instance, I remember "helping" my father on trips to the hardware store, or changing a tire, or painting the back fence. These were not everyday chores to me, but rather wonderful adventures. I also remember at a young age feeling the mercurial nature of time. Things would happen, or something would exist for an instant—a glance, a movement—and then be over and gone forever, and I found this to be very curious. It all seemed like a secret I didn't know.

When I was a youngster I loved watching and playing sports, especially neighborhood basketball. I still love that smacking sound of a ball hitting cement. I also hiked a lot into the nearby canyons to look for salamanders in the streams. I used to dig channels in the earth, fill them with water to make my own streams and rivers, and then build small towns, islands, palaces, and such. The rivers would shift their courses, and all kinds of unforeseen things would take shape. This was great fun, and very messy.

In school I recall I enjoyed subjects that touched on science or art. Even now I get a thrill when I see a box of crayons. Inside are black crickets, white snow, pumpkins, people, apples on a tree—everything that makes life interesting.

JC: What was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

DC: I think children sense the natural complexity in situations, and I remember my response to that was wishing the world would slow down so I could really look, see, and understand it. Maybe through the process of writing we are allowed to ponder all of this so that an experience will show itself more fully. Through writing, our experience becomes almost fish-like as it rises up just under the surface of the water and leaves new impressions. I think writing serves that function for me.

I don't remember poetry being a part of my upbringing either in my home or at school. However, I do remember a poem inside a little frame hanging in the hallway of our home. It went:

> True friendship is a Gordian knot
> Which angel hands have tied;
> By heavenly skills its textures wrought,
> Who shall its folds divide?

I didn't make a conscious effort to memorize it, but of course that is what happened. It just got lodged in my soul. I didn't know the meaning of many of the words in that poem and the overall meaning was a mystery to me, but I found great pleasure in the sound of the words and the fact that I could *almost* understand what was being said. However, I didn't write much at all when I was younger. I have read about writers who started writing poetry while quite young, but that certainly wasn't me. My awareness of the language really didn't begin until I was a freshman in high school and we were introduced to Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. I simply couldn't believe that there could be a piece of literature like this with such music, power, and meaning. At that time I had no conception of rhythm in writing or the craftsmanship in poetry. I was just flabbergasted by the magnificent use of language in that play.

I can also recall going to a piano concerto one day and noticing that the music seemed to fit the lines of a poem I had memorized. That really impressed me. But these memories are only little things I started thinking about more and more often as time went by. It wasn't until after college when I started teaching in the elementary grades that I came into contact with good children's literature. Once I started reading all these stories and poems to my students and saw how much they enjoyed them, my interest in writing grew.

One summer, after school was out, I took a class at UCLA that was specifically about writing for children. There I met author Sue Alexander. She was marvelously supportive of my efforts. That experience gave me the courage to enroll in a poetry class taught by Myra Cohn Livingston. For me, she was a once-in-a-lifetime instructor. I felt so fortunate to learn about the craft of poetry from someone with her insight and delicate perception. I remember each time a poem was read, she would bow her head and close her eyes as if she were listening with every cell in her body. She was also very forthright and direct in her comments to us about our work, and we both appreciated and needed this. She was also a great help in getting me started in publishing. Mrs. Livingston was working on an anthology, and one of my poems fit into what she was trying to create in that anthology. She used my poem "Here She Comes" in *New Year's Poems* (1987), and that is where I began as a published poet.

JC: How do you work as a writer? How would you describe your own process of composing?

DC: Writing, for me, is a solitary business. I start out alone and in many ways feel like a frog on a lily pad. It may sound strange, but I wait very still in one place until something flashes by my mind's eye. I have a kind of game I play with myself. I pretend I am unseen and watch the thing I'm thinking about move closer and closer until—ZAP—I catch it, or at least the essence of it. If I'm a lucky frog, I may wind up with some words in my mouth. The task then is to get them out on paper and begin to work with them. At times like this, nothing disturbs me. It doesn't matter if the whole world is in the house.

Also, much of what I write about comes from memory. Although accurate observation is important, I'm not the kind of person who will go out, take in an experience, and return home to write about it. I remember something, and then my mind just shifts to an imaginative process. I would say to students who feel they can't write because they don't go to enough places to observe that they already have everything they need. When they get up in the morning and walk out of the house and down the street to school, they're surrounded by the variety of life. And they carry within themselves their own fluid, flowing world, their own way of knowing. These things are available to them wherever they are. There is a brimming quality to it all.

JC: Where do you prefer to do your writing?

DC: I write in a room upstairs in my house. I have an old electric typewriter that hums and makes a happy clacking sound as I type. I have become so used to those sounds and they are such a comfort to me; I'm not sure I could write anywhere else. As a writer, my focus doesn't last long. I usually write in little thirty-minute spurts. Then I have to do something really physical. I go outside to shoot baskets or trim a hedge. When I feel ready, I go back to the typewriter and start again. On a productive day, I not only get a lot of writing done, but I also get a lot of work around the house done, too.

JC: A hallmark of your poetry is the "curious speaker." Typically, the voice in your poems is that of a youngster in awe of the world. For example, this is seen in "Tent," in which the speaker ponders the uses of skin. Is this curiosity a reflection of your own personality?

DC: I think it is natural as daylight for a child to love the world and want to explore it. For children, the world is so available, ever present, and forever surprising. Events in life press in dramatically for them. I try to capture these feelings in my poetry because I feel they are so universal to childhood.

I don't think I am any more innately curious than the next person. I know children are *very* curious. I can remember that when I was eight, for example, I used to watch bats near our home. I especially remember their erratic flitting over a stream at twilight. I assumed they were trying to capture insects as they swooped around, but I didn't know for sure. The fact I didn't know for sure really bothered me. I just *had* to know. So, I went home to get a piece of salami, came back, and threw an insect-sized piece into the air. I couldn't believe it when the bat caught it! I threw another piece into the air, and the bats came swooping back. It was like feeding fish overhead. This really surprised me. I know children become surprised all the time when they are playing; this is just part of learning about the world.

I also remember once being given a beautiful paint box full of brushes and different shades of paint. After a few days of playing with the paints, I decided I didn't want to paint pictures; I wanted to paint the actual objects that were represented by pictures. So, I went outside and painted all the shells of the snails in the yard, at least all I could find. I painted all the shells on the north side red, and all the shells on the east, west, and south different colors. I learned a lot from this experience. I was especially amazed at how much snails move around. I also discovered that after their nightly roamings, the snails on the north and east sides pretty much returned to the same place from which they started. This was also very curious to me. I suppose it was just a child's way of meeting the world, of wanting to discover cause and effect relationships that influence our lives. I'm glad this curiosity comes through in my poetry. Poetry should make children question and explore events of their lives.

JC: Stylistically, another characteristic of your poetry is word economy. In poems like "Skeleton" and "Calling Me" (both from *Balloons and Other Poems*, 1990), each word serves an important function as powerful descriptions are built. What is your philosophy related to this word economy in the poetry you write for children and young adults?

DC: For me, I believe this grows from a desire to see how much one word can do mixed with a desire to cut out the extraneous. Carefully chosen words can transmit so much energy. Words are like children in a classroom. Each one comes with its own personal history and disposition. Some are easy to be with and have this subtle way of being able to fit in just about anywhere. Others are more rigid and work best when they find just the right niche or circumstance. To the writer, they are all unique and full of possibility. Putting them together can be exciting and wonderful—like the special moment when a person using a divining rod discovers water.

It takes all the patience I can muster to hold a poem together so that there is a coherence and order in this vibrancy that results when words naturally form relationships. Hopefully, through all of this I can create one emotion, one spirit, in each poem.

JC: Sound is used as a major unifying device in your poetry. More so than through other rhythmic or formal poetic structures, sounds create images as the poems unfold.

DC: I didn't use sound purposefully very often when I first started writing, but I do now. There is almost an impenetrable mystery to sound. I find it very close to the sense of touch. It's as if through our eardrums and the delicate bones inside of our ears, we are constantly being nudged and patted and tapped. For me, sounds evoke both shape and meaning. There are times when it is almost like you could walk around them as if they are sculptures to be examined, as if you could sense their volume and center of gravity, and it is the poet's delight to work with these qualities.

I know I was aware of some of this at an early age. I have vivid memories of being fascinated by the sounds from large groups of relatives talking all at once as they visited with each other in our living room. I can still see the bright sun shining through the windows lighting up their faces as I listened to them. I really didn't care so much about what they were talking about; I was most interested in the *way* they were saying things and the way their eyes and bodies would match the sounds being produced. It seemed sounds rose, fell, and glittered in the sunlight. It also seemed like some of the sounds I could scoop out and hold in my hand. Because of background noise, some were lost the minute they were uttered. This interchange of sound and motion was of great interest to me, and it still is today.

For the poet, sounds carry tremendous power. We know that for many children, sounds are just as real as any image they see. Sounds came before alphabets and word meanings. They also affect us physically, just as poetic meter can. As we read, sounds can startle us, get us to begin tapping a foot, or make us mirror the action of something being described through the sound. The interplay of these sounds can also create harmony, and if they echo one another they can hold an idea together. A shift in sound can also influence the tone of a poem. In poetry, all of these things are great fun, perhaps because we're dealing with something a little mysterious, something that gets near to the origins of language. I realize I am probably better off if I don't consciously think about sound while a poem is being written. Sounds will follow the feeling of what I'm working on, and I'll look more closely at what sounds have come forward during the editing stages of composing. While the poem is unfolding I need to work more on getting the right rhythm, expanding or redirecting a thought, or creating just the right image for the subject at hand.

JC: Personification is also central to your work. In your poetry, animals and objects, both of which are usually at the heart of your poems, take on human characteristics, which help young readers easily identify with the subjects and events found within.

DC: This way of seeing things comes naturally to me. Although personification is a poetic device, it is also a way of thinking. I'm sure, for me, this way of thinking started in my childhood. I remember I enjoyed what I thought was a deep acquaintance with a maple tree, our back door, and the mantel clock. Looking back, I can see that relationships for me didn't stop with family and friends but extended out into the world. I suspect this is also a universal experience of childhood. In poetry, I don't think readers would respond to personification if it weren't already present in their own minds. It's like when the wind blows down from the mountains, and we hear it rushing through the canyons, getting louder and nearer, louder and nearer, we don't need to literally hear the words to know it is saying, "I am coming!" Such personification appeals to the emotions of readers. We learn a lot from how we feel. Maybe personification works because somehow it seems when we truly know something, it becomes inseparable from ourselves. When it is used effectively, it just seems reasonable and right. While all this may be true, it is also something I have been trying not to use so much in my poetry.

JC: Why, when you use this poetic device so effectively, are you trying to move away from it?

DC: I'm trying to move away from so much use of personification because I want to grow and try different things in the lines. However, seeing the world through personification makes me feel strongly connected to a poem. For me, it isn't so much the facts involved in personification as it is the relationships that are brought forth through the images that are created. It allows the reader to enter into the liveliness of the world around us, giving it a richness and hinting at a much larger unity. Also, the effect on the reader may not lie in the strangeness of a comparison as much as through an unexpected confrontation with oneself. In this way, it makes us look at the world and ourselves in a fresh light.

JC: In many instances you choose to use the shape of the lines, and therefore how these lines will be read, to represent the motion of an object or event being described. This is seen in a poem like "Mama's Song" (from *Balloons and Other Poems*), in which the rocking of a boat on the waves is captured through a back-and-forth line arrangement. This combination of subject and shape, when joined effectively, entices the reader to become actively involved in the lines. Is this effect difficult for you to create?

DC: Line arrangement is a tool which can be used by a poet to create a verbal and visual event. I'm cautious of using it more because I'm still learning how to use it effectively. For me, each line of a poem is one part of a unity. Even if there isn't punctuation at the end of a line, there is still a boundary between its ending and the next line's beginning. This boundary can link action and ideas or it can be an abyss. How the poet chooses to use shape and arrangement determines which it will be. As I write the lines, I feel movement strongly myself, but it is difficult to tell how readers will later respond to this. This is an area of great interest to me.

JC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

DC: I would like to see all poetry, not just my own, introduced by teachers who recognize it as a means of grasping reality. I wish teachers would put aside guide books and just take the hands of children in their classrooms and step right into a poem in the spirit of pleasure, playfulness, and discovery. I'm also aware that sharing poetry requires a certain amount of daring, because it isn't like prose. In poetry the language may be arranged in an unfamiliar way, or the words may be ambiguous, charged with feeling, or may not follow the logic of grammar. Also, the ideas in a poem may make more demands on the imagination than on logical reason. I think at times all of this can be tough for teachers, and I sympathize with them, especially if their primary area of study is outside of the language arts. However, I am inclined to believe that there isn't a teacher or child who doesn't respond on some level to poetry. To experience a poem, to honestly feel the meaning, can even touch the life of the child who hides behind a snicker. I really believe all can be enriched by a good poem.

JC: Related to this, what type of interaction do you strive for or hope for between reader and print?

DC: I hope that children feel the very fabric of the sounds in a poem and hope that they experience that close physical quality of the influence of those sounds. Through this, I hope they sense a deeper involvement, a meaning behind the words. All of us need to slow down and truly listen to the language. I would also hope that through poetry, readers would be able to explore both reality and the inner life of imagination. I would like to think that when a child reads something like *Balloons and Other Poems,* the child would feel that the natural world is calling to him or her. I hope they see they belong to this natural world and that it is close and alive and original. We can do more than just observe it; we can feel it! This is the type of response I hope for when my poetry is read.

JC: What suggestions do you have for young readers interested in writing poetry?

DC: A beginning suggestion for children is to get acquainted with words and learn to enjoy them, turn them round on your tongue, feel them bump and hiss and slip. Say words out loud. They were meant to be spoken. Know that even a worn-out, overused word, if placed in a certain position, can become luminous. It can take on a new life and a new reality. And understand that the thoughts and feelings inside of us have to rely on these words in order to show themselves through poetry. Every child knows words, and they're from a language that is so lively that one moment it can sound like the rattledy-clack of railroad cars and the next like the drumming of the rain. Many children today are quite inhibited in the classroom when it comes to anything that isn't strictly academic. I would want to tell these children not to let uncertainty or anxious feelings invade their circle of concentration when they are trying to do something new, especially something like the writing of poetry. Just write your thoughts down first and don't worry about getting everything perfect the first time. You aren't going to learn too many lessons if you aren't willing to take chances. You may not even like the first words you jot down for a poem. This happens to me quite often. Just put the words on paper anyway and have fun with them. Play and fiddle with them in freedom, and while you do, try to see and almost be the thing you're writing about. Then the right words are much more likely to follow, and you can slowly move toward what may be some sort of prescribed order or structure. At the same time, take pleasure in your imaginative process. Treasure it and nurture it. Value the fabulous kingdom of your own mind. This is essential.

JC: Related to your work as a writer, what is next for you?

DC: I have a new poetry book out called *Rich Lizard and Other Poems* (1993). Following that is *Miss Mabel's Table* (1994), a lighthearted rhyming story, and also a forthcoming story poem as a picture book called *Who Comes?* Right now I would very much like to put together another collection of poems. I love writing for children and trying to capture a little of the magic in the things of this world!

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Paul Janeczko

For Paul Janeczko, poet and anthologist, poetry is a vehicle for sharing humanity. Readers of his poems will find a focus upon people rather than upon events. As the poems unfold, readers are introduced to characters who are so well developed that by the last line they begin to seem like family. These characters come to life through masterful use of dialogue, a hallmark of Janeczko's writing.

The world seen in Paul Janeczko's poetry is also built through his use of striking, often very unusual images. In the poem "Hoods" (from Brickyard Summer, 1989*), for example, people in black leather jackets are described as resembling "crows huddled around a road kill." Through this imagery, Janeczko serves up for his readers a fresh view of everyday events. He believes he is able to craft these images because he does not write "down" to young readers. Rather, he prefers to challenge them by using combinations of words that, at first glance, may seem quite different or out of the ordinary in a particular context.*

Janeczko is also a talented anthologist who has assembled collections of poems that range from Strings: A Gathering of Family Poems *(1984) to* Preposterous: Poems of Youth *(1991) to* Postcard Poems: A Collection of Poetry for Sharing *(1979). Through these anthologies, Janeczko has taken young readers to new horizons in the world of poetry.*

Today, Paul Janeczko lives in Hebron, Maine.

Photo: Nadine Edris

JC: Please tell us about your early life and origins as a writer.

PJ: I grew up in New Jersey and went to Catholic schools all the way through high school. I have three brothers and a sister. My brothers and I are all fairly close in age, so they were the people I hung around with when I was a kid. I really didn't have those strong kinds of childhood friends that last forever. When kids read *Brickyard Summer,* they assume it's autobiographical and ask about Raymond and what he thinks about being put in that book. They are disappointed when I tell them there really was no Raymond. My best friends were always my brothers. We had a school across the street from us that had a field just waiting to be played on. That's where we spent most of our time—playing pickup baseball games.

When I was a kid, I disliked school a great deal. I went because I *had* to go. I wasn't especially interested in reading until about sixth grade when my mother—and she still tells this story to embarrass her son, the writer—got me reading by simply saying, "Read for just twenty minutes after supper." I'd always tell her I didn't want to read. After all, I thought I was reading enough while doing my homework. You know, reading civics or about the Belgian Congo or flax or whatever. I wanted to be out riding bikes, playing ball, and getting into trouble with my brothers. Finally, just to shut her up, one night I picked up the Hardy Boys book called *The Tower Treasure* and read for twenty minutes. I did this for a few nights in a row. When twenty minutes was over I was out the door, even if I was in the middle of the sentence. I was gone. I thought, "Who cares?" I was starting to get headaches because I was reading with one eye on the book and one eye on the clock. But what happened from that experience was that twenty minutes became twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five—not because Mom was making me read, but because I was really beginning to get into the Hardy Boys books. That's when I really started reading and seeing what reading could mean in my life. To this day my mother claims responsibility to some degree for the success of my career because she was the one who got me interested in reading. My parents didn't go to college, but they were of the generation that thought it very important for their kids to do more, have more, do better than they did. For my parents, reading was a part of that. From there I entered a period where I read everything I could get my hands on that had "FBI" or "G-Men" or "Gangster" in the title. That's probably why to this day I still read mysteries and why my agent is now trying to sell an adult mystery I just finished writing.

When I got to high school I was pretty much ambivalent toward school. I graduated seventy-fourth in a class of 150. If I got a C on something, I could live with that. If I got a D, well, at least I didn't fail. At this time my interests weren't in academics. Baseball was my true love, and I spent as much time playing it as I possibly could.

JC: What was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

PJ: People always want writers to say, "When I was four I wrote my first poem on the kitchen wall." But that didn't happen to me. I did write a little in high school because I was on the newspaper staff. Later, when I went to college, I wrote some really bad love poetry—the obligatory stuff many English majors write. However, there are two things about my development as a writer that stand out in my mind.

One of these is that when I started teaching, I started writing for teaching magazines. I had some articles published in these magazines early on. I did an interview column for *English Journal* for a number of years and did a book review column for the New England Association of Teachers of English. That's where I really started developing an awareness of audience. Secondly, while in the classroom I taught as much adolescent literature as I could squeeze in. I started teaching in 1968. That was a great time to be a teacher: the open classroom, the school without walls, walls without schools—all those trendy things were happening, as was the paperback revolution. Books like *The Outsiders* and *The Pigman* were just being published, so those were the books I was teaching. I read those books and said, "I can write this!" So, I sat down and tried to write a young adult novel, and it turned out it was one heck of a lot harder than it looked. I put aside that dream for a time and concentrated on writing educational articles, but I never gave up that desire to write for young readers.

JC: Could you illustrate your process of composing by sharing how you wrote the poems for *Brickyard Summer*?

PJ: For me, everything in writing begins with characterization. If we think of novels, films, or TV shows we love, it's probably because of the characters. When I first started writing, I tried to get some novels published. The manuscripts would be sent back with comments like, "We like your story, but we don't care about the characters," or "We like your story, but these characters aren't fully developed." After seeing a good number of these comments, I finally got the message and spent more time working on characterization. So today, especially in my poetry, character is the first area I work on.

When I was writing the poems for *Brickyard Summer,* I'd first put on some music to get me into the mood to write. Then I'd grab a fountain pen and a legal pad with big, fat lines and put the name of a character at the top of a page. From there I'd spend some time writing down whatever would come to my mind about that character. The important thing I learned through this process was not to censor myself by saying things like, "Oh, that won't work," or, "That's stupid; he's not going to be like that." I learned to write down everything that came to mind. Then, I'd go back to my notes and pick out the things that really seemed to capture the character. I took these pieces of detail and next tried to shape them into poems by tinkering with words, sounds, and lines. I did all that longhand. It wasn't until after a poem began to develop that I moved over to the word processor. Finally, I did revisions on the copies that I printed from the word processor. That's pretty much how I work as a writer.

JC: One of the most striking characteristics of your poetry is that these characters you create are so well developed (Raymond, Glass-Eye Harry Coote, Walker). This focus on people rather than events produces a warm, friendly, inviting tone in the poems.

PJ: When I'm writing I am trying to tell a good story and give insight into characters and into people's minds, and in the process it frequently comes out being inviting and comfortable. This is something that took me a lot of time, effort, and soul-searching to achieve. When I first submitted the manuscript for *Brickyard Summer,* the editor, Richard Jackson, sent it back right away, and on every page he had written at least two or three times, "Sentimental—too sentimental." I looked at those comments and said, "Oh my goodness!" I had to decide if I trusted this editor's judgment enough to believe those comments and work to make improvements in the poems. I finally believed what he was saying and started revising. I feel those changes helped quite a bit and made *Brickyard Summer* a much better book—and me a better writer. I think I really grew as a writer through that revision process.

JC: Baseball provides a common thread, a common motif, that runs through your poetry. In many poems (like "Stories," "Sundays," and "Mystery," all from *Brickyard Summer*) the sights and sounds of the game serve to build upon the characters being described. I know you loved baseball as a child, but why so much of the baseball imagery in your poetry today?

PJ: The game has always been magical to me, and in my family baseball was always a big part of our lives. Many of my fondest memories of childhood are of going to the Polo Grounds with my dad to see the Giants play. Later, I enjoyed going with my brothers to Shea Stadium to watch the Mets. I remember the first time my wife came to my parents' house; she was stunned by how baseball seemed to be the major focus. We even went so far as arranging the chairs around the dinner table so that those who wanted to watch the game on TV would have an unobstructed view. My brothers, my father, and I would all sit crammed on one side of the table, and my mom and my wife would sit on the other. Even today as I travel to different cities, I try to get to as many games as I can. It's funny, but when I'm in a crowded stadium I always think, "Walt Whitman would really love this!" He'd have really gotten into the mingling of the masses. There has also been more good poetry written about baseball than any other sport. That was also another tie-in for me. I always felt I had a baseball book in me waiting to come out, but I don't know if I'll ever do a full-blown baseball book. Maybe all my baseball writing is just slowly leaking out. In my novel *Bridges to Cross* (1986) I use baseball as a kind of backdrop; the kids are listening to the 1961 World Series between the Yankees and Reds. In *Brickyard Summer* I have several baseball poems. Also, I am currently researching a book for children on the evolution, design, and construction of baseball stadiums. Baseball is just in my soul. In the collection of poems I just finished, I have several about baseball. This is one from that collection, which will be called *Stardust otel* (1993)—no "H" in "hotel"; the "H" fell off the sign. The poem is called "Rusty."

Rusty Hughes played
his entire career at Louisville
except for three games
with the Cardinals at the end of '78
when they battled the Mets
to avoid the cellar.

Now
he helps with the high school team:
hitting grounders,
barking praise,
and talking about the Show;

enjoys unfolding
a tattered sports page box score,
pointing to his name,
and, with a smile,
the 1 in the H column;

but mostly
works at the A&P
fielding questions
about chicken thighs,
Cornish hens,
and leg of lamb;

fiddles with the radio dial
with the nervous hands of a shortstop,
searching the static
for faraway games and the sound of his name.

(© 1993 by Paul Janeczko)

I'm also working on an anthology of baseball poems. I have been thinking about it for years, because what is available for young readers is pretty much the old standard poems.

JC: Another characteristic of your poetry is that very striking, very different images will suddenly explode in the lines to provide a fresh view of the subject at hand. For example, in the poem "Raymond" from *Brickyard Summer*, hair is described as being "the color of pencil shavings." What is it about Paul Janeczko that produces such wonderful images?

PJ: Many writers make the mistake of getting into a mindset that tells them, "I'm writing for kids." They don't give young readers enough credit. Today, kids are very language- and music-oriented, and writers shouldn't write down to them. Above all, I try not to do that. Even in my anthologies for children and young adults, I don't want kids to see just the pat stuff all the time in every poem. I want readers to reach a little bit. In my own poems I try to give them something they can handle, but at the same time I try to present something that they will have to stretch for to get what is happening. That's why I strive for "different" imagery in my poems. Creating these images is a big part of what poetry is all about. When I visit schools and talk to kids, I spend a lot of time talking about images and how a writer should "show" instead of "tell" to get a good word or line. You have to be willing to work for these images. Sometimes they come to me when I'm getting ready for bed or taking a walk. Other times, it's kind of inexplicable—the images just come when you least expect them.

JC: Another characteristic of your poetry, and one that is not all that common in contemporary poetry for children and young adults, is your skilled use of dialogue in the lines. This dialogue adds an immediacy to the events, a "present tense" that draws in the reader.

PJ: I think part of this comes from the poetry I read. Some of the—for the lack of a better word—"rural" poets use a lot of dialogue in their poetry. Frost did it, and Robert Pack and Ted Kooser do it. Rural poets tend to use it in order to put in the vernacular and local flavor; this has always fascinated me. A writer can do so much with dialogue. It breaks up the poem. It is also a means of characterization, because through it the poet can present how the person speaks, the kinds of words he or she uses, and the expressions he or she makes. In essence, the dialogue serves to amplify experience and make that experience real.

JC: You are considered one of the leading anthologists in the field of poetry for children and young adults. How did you get started on your work in this area?

PJ: My interest in this grew from my work as a teacher in the 1970s. The poems in the anthologies and literature books I had in my classroom weren't appealing to my students, so I started bringing in mimeographed copies of poems I'd find in other places. I wish my own high school teachers had done that. In high school we were given poetry books like *Come Hither* and *Poet's Gold,* collections that were filled with very maudlin, rhyming verse. As a result, in high school, I had no interest in poetry at all. I didn't want this to happen to my students, so I started bringing in little collections that I had put together.

One year I went to an NCTE convention, and at a social hour I met Jerry Weiss. I knew his name because he started the Dell Laurel Leaf imprint. We got to talking and he looked at my name tag and said, "Oh, Cleveland. I'm going to be there in three weeks to give a speech. Why don't we get together for dinner?" I said that sounded good to me, so I gave him my address and thought, "Yeah, right. This bigwig from the East is going to call me?" But he did, and three weeks later at dinner he said to me, "If you have any manuscripts or anything you want me to read, I'd be happy to look them over." I gave serious thought to his words and decided to put together a manuscript of poems I had used with my students and some new ones I had found after that. I sent them off, and that manuscript became my first anthology, *The Crystal Image* (1977).

I have been very lucky as an anthologist. I always say to my wife, "Isn't it weird how all of this has fallen together?" Becoming an anthologist isn't something that you set out to do. You just can't imagine your son or daughter coming down to breakfast one day and saying, "Mom. Dad. I've talked to a counselor at school, and I'm going to become an anthologist." It just doesn't happen that way. Working as an anthologist has been one of the most wonderful things to happen to me. It put me in touch with so many wonderful people, from poets to editors. There is that human side of it that most people never see. And once I got started, one book just seemed to follow another. At the same time, putting these anthologies together takes time away from my own writing, so I don't know how much longer I'll do them.

JC: Tell us about your work habits as an anthologist. What are some of the steps you follow in putting together a collection?

PJ: I'm always reading and gathering poems. Generally, I read some poetry every day: morning, noon, or night. One of the great things about poetry is that I can sit and read two poems even when I'm doing something like getting my car worked on. And I always pack a poetry book in my suitcase when I travel.

People also send me poems all the time. Any good poems I read, I put in a folder called "New Poems." From time to time I look through that folder and start thinking, "Okay, here's a poem about death, so I better put it in the 'death' folder. This is about flowers, so I'll put it in the 'nature' folder." As a result, I have thousands of poems I haven't used that are in folders arranged by subject or topic. When I get an idea for an anthology, I pull out the appropriate folders and start looking through them.

The most important part of the process for me in putting together an anthology is finding the first and last poem. Those are usually the first poems I want to get for a book. Most often they are poems that just leap out, and I know where they belong. For instance, I'm just now finishing a collection of "place" poems. The last poem in that collection is called "The End of the Line." You don't have to be a Rhodes Scholar to realize that poem would go nicely at the end of the book. The first and last poems provide the foundation for the whole book, so after I find them I feel like I can relax a little because I know all I have to do is find 120 more to go between. Because I have so many poems in folders to draw from, this really isn't a problem.

JC: How would you say you have changed most as an anthologist through the years?

PJ: When I did *Dont Forget to Fly: A Cycle of Modern Poems* (1981), I started to do something a little bit differently from a lot of other anthologists, and that was to have smaller sections and more sections than was usual in an anthology. Traditionally, in an anthology there would be thirty poems about something like death, fifty poems about nature, and so on. Well, in *Dont Forget to Fly* I used smaller groups of poems. I had groups of three, four, and five poems—three poems about teeth, that sort of thing. However, having smaller groups makes the book much more difficult to do because not only do the poems have to go together but the sections also need to fit. At the same time, I think it also makes the book more interesting. I did a book called *Pocket Poems: Selected for a Journey* (1985), which has about 120 poems in it. The first fifty are about being in a certain place and are poems about childhood or adolescent concerns. Then there's a group of twelve poems in the middle of the book that are all seasonal poems. I put those in there to show the passage of time. Then there's another section of fifty poems about being away somewhere. They are about more adult concerns and "city" things. The collection then ends with a few poems about coming back. The very last poem is called "Sunset." So in that collection a reader may see that sort of movement. I know that very few people will sit down and read any anthology from beginning to end as if it were a novel, but if they were to do that with my books and be attentive to what they were reading, they would see a pattern, a reason, a movement in each book.

Somewhere down the line I also have to start a process which is a real pain in the neck: getting permission to use all of the poems. In the past my editors had staff people who would write all the letters and make all the phone calls to publishers and writers. Now I do practically all the permission stuff myself. It is a tremendous amount of clerical work—and my least favorite part of putting together an anthology.

JC: Of which anthology are you most proud?

PJ: Many writers will say, "The most recent one"—but I can narrow it down a little bit. My most recent anthology is called *Looking for Your Name* (1993). It's a very strong, political book. I'm very proud of it because I wanted to say some things about issues like how America spends its money, human rights, and the values that people have. For that book I found poems that said a lot of things that I wanted to say, and the poems said them more eloquently than I could.

My two favorite books would have to be *Poetspeak: In Their Work, About Their Work* (1983) and *The Place My Words Are Looking For: What Poets Say about and through Their Work* (1990) because they not only give kids poems to read but they also have essays by the poets and offer insight into the creative process. Many kids aren't able to take creative writing classes, but they want to write poetry and don't know where to turn. These books could be a great help to them.

JC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

PJ: Recently I was in Atlanta, Georgia, to talk to kids in several elementary schools. I usually tell them a little about how I got into writing and then read a few of my poems. I have a bunch of silly, goofy rhyming poems that I'm trying to put together in a book, so I read to these kids some of those. When I finished reading a few, a third-grade girl asked me, "Do you write any poems that are deep?" I looked over and said, "No." I think kids have this notion that a poem has to *mean* something. That's one of the things I wish kids could get over. A poem might simply be telling a story. It might just be a simple description. So, above all, I'd like to see teachers remind young readers that a poem does not have to mean something.

Also, I think it is important that we don't expect the kids to like every poem that is presented. It is simply not going to happen. If I liked every poem I read, I couldn't do an anthology! We don't even like every play Shakespeare wrote. He wrote some real turkeys. We also don't like every novel by our favorite author or every song by our favorite group. So, why should we expect young readers to like every poem we present to them? I certainly don't expect people to like every single poem in my anthologies or every single poem I have written. Certain poems are going to touch some readers, and certain poems will touch others.

It is also important to have young readers just experience the language. Read poetry aloud to them and see what happens—see what they notice about the words. Mark Twain said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." That difference is what I'd like young readers to be able to see as they hear or read a poem. If kids are given the chance, this will come in time.

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

PJ: I would just tell them to keep reading—not just my stuff, but also the work of as many poets as possible. Never stop reading poetry. Read all kinds of poetry by as many different kinds of poets as you can find. It's particularly important to do a lot of reading if you think you might want to write some poems yourself. Then, write your poems and see what you can do. The sky's your limit!

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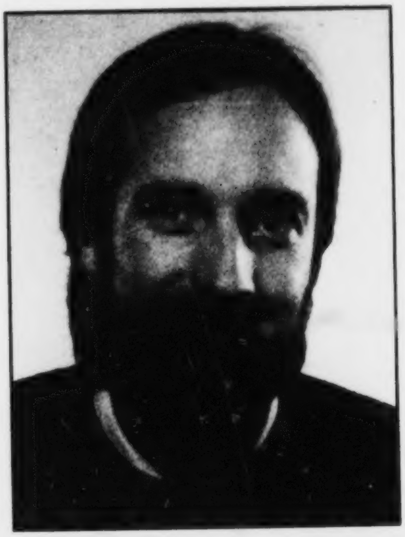
Michael Spooner

Michael Spooner grew up near Fairbanks, where he spent much of his childhood exploring the Alaskan wilderness. There he developed a respect for and bond with nature, both of which are evident today in his writing. Spooner's writing for children began when he wrote little poems and verses for his daughter and slipped them into her lunch box in the morning before she left for school. It wasn't long before these poems grew into a sizable collection that became his first book of poetry, A Moon in Your Lunch Box *(1993).*

Spooner's poetry is characterized by a blend of repetition and shape and arrangement of lines. Both work in concert to produce poems pleasing to the ear and eye. His concrete poetry, in particular, reflects the world as seen through the eyes of a child. Subjects for his poems range from the different phases of the moon to playing in the mud to chewing bubble gum. All capture that exciting time in childhood when imagination and reality begin to merge.

Today, Michael Spooner lives with his wife and two children in Logan, Utah, where he is director of the Utah State University Press.



JC: Please tell us about your childhood.

MS: I grew up in Alaska, near Fairbanks. My parents moved there in the mid-1950s, more or less on a whim of my father's. I have done some looking into my family history, and it seems those on my father's side were always moving west; I guess it was just my father's turn. Before I was out of elementary school my parents bought what used to be a mining claim on the side of a hill several miles out of town. This was in an area where the interior Alaska gold rush took place just after the turn of the century. My parents pulled a tiny house trailer up an old wagon road where the miners used to go up with supplies and, presumably, down with gold. Gradually, we built a house around the trailer.

I spent a good deal of my time playing alone in the woods or just wandering the countryside. I was always narrating to myself. I would usually imagine myself as a person in another time, and I would be telling myself the story of what happens to that person. This was typically something like, "Pausing to drink at the stream, he noticed a bear track." Or, "He raised the flintlock to his shoulder as the rabbit flew by, incredibly felling it with a desperate shot. Ha! Meat for the table tonight." These are not things I told anyone at the time, of course.

My father became a teacher, my mother an administrator, and they taught me to respect learning. They were both quite gifted verbally, so it isn't a wonder that reading and writing came easily for me. Also, they were religious people, very devout. For me that meant lots of memorizing, and it meant learning to see the spiritual potential in most experiences. One could say it meant learning to watch for the paradox, the antinomy, the double message. Later on, when I was a teenager, it also meant rebelling in a big way.

As a youngster, I liked music a great deal, but I wasn't as good with music as I wanted to be. My mother sang serious music—opera and choral—for many years, and my father was a folk music enthusiast. I wasn't very good, but I think playing around with music and listening to my parents taught me to listen for the music in language: the tonalities and rhythms. I also think this has had an influence upon my work as a poet.

JC: What were you like in school?

MS: I suppose I was a quiet subversive. I think my teachers found me tolerable, because at least I would get the work finished. They encouraged me to write. But one of the best things a teacher ever said to me was a challenge—a criticism, actually. The assignment was to write one of those seventh-grade papers on drug abuse, and of course I bluffed my way through, giving what I thought she wanted in five paragraphs with neat topic sentences and a high moral tone: "Just Say No!" My teacher wrote back, "You are a glib soul, Michael Spooner, and this is not acceptable." Good advice to any writer, I'd say; the reader you respect will make you work your gift.

JC: Tell us about your other early writing experiences.

MS: I didn't do much serious writing when I was young, but I do remember writing a few poems while in elementary school. By the time I got to high school I had begun to hang out with some folks who were into music and theater, and they didn't think it was strange at all for a person to write poetry. So, looking back, I suppose it was fortunate for me that I didn't hang out with basketball jocks! I remember one year in high school I was signing my friends' yearbooks and was trying to do a poem in each of them. That was a strange experience, but fun. In college I found it fun to write little poems for girlfriends. They were very appreciative, and this got me *really* interested in writing.

JC: Growing from these experiences, what was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

MS: I think the natural environment had as much to do with that as anything. I have so many fond memories of the Alaskan scene: the mountains, the glaciers, the tundra, all the wildlife, the northern lights. I feel extremely lucky to be able to say I grew up under the wing of the wilderness. Part of the gift of the wilderness is the isolation it provides, since it gives you the chance to be both in touch with yourself and confronted with the soul of nature. You are out where you face everything that isn't human, everything that couldn't care less about humanity—geology or the weather, for example. And the animals I grew up with were very much the same in this regard. If you stand face to face with a moose, as I have done, you realize there is much in this world that doesn't operate by human rules or codes. The way we interact with the world as human beings isn't at all the same as how other creatures interact with the same environment. It is sort of frightening, but it is also fascinating just to try to confront and embrace that otherness in the natural world. As I have gotten older, I have tried to capture some of that otherness in my writing.

As far as a spark for children's writing is concerned, this took place when my daughter, Nancy, was about four or five and was starting to read everything. I began writing little stories and then poems for her. For a writer this was bliss: I had an audience who was willing to read everything that I put on paper. Hearing her respond to my writing was so much better than sitting and agonizing over a computer keyboard and trying to imagine an audience. What I enjoyed most of all at this time was writing little poems for her while she was getting ready for school in the morning. I'd slip these in her lunch box between the sandwich and the apple. Most often these would be really short, really silly pieces on yellow Post-it notes. Sometimes they would rhyme, and sometimes they wouldn't. The poem in *A Moon in Your Lunch Box* about mashing the banana ("My Banana") is an example of one of the silliest notes. It is obviously a perversion of Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "My Shadow." Nancy got a real charge out of these writings—or else she was just playing along out of charity to encourage my writing—and I got a charge out of doing them.

Literally, it was from that game I was playing with Nancy that the manuscript for *A Moon in Your Lunch Box* began. What happened was that my writing innocently moved from the little pieces that I would scratch out for her and slip into her lunch box to more elaborate pieces that I would put on my computer and let her read. Suddenly, I had a manuscript of about twenty poems, and I decided I'd try for a picture book. So, I sent the manuscript to a few publishers and actually got a nibble or two. From that, the idea for a longer collection of poems evolved.

JC: Who would you say were the writers who influenced you most as you developed as a writer? Who were your poetic heroes and heroines?

MS: I'm aware of being shaped by my reading of certain groups of poets: metaphysical poets (Donne, Herbert, Blake, and Hopkins), poets who experimented with shape (Herbert and cummings, but also the modern concrete poets—Gomringer, Solt), poets of nature (Whitman, Frost, and Berry), and some humorous or nonsense poets (W. S. Gilbert, Walt Kelly the cartoonist, Eve Merriam). I'm also aware that I make fairly conscious use of certain philosophical traditions: the Bible and Christian thought, the Tao, and Native American thought.

To be as specific as possible, I think there is most evidence in my work of debts to Robert Frost and e. e. cummings. And Walt Whitman is very much there in spirit, though I haven't read everything of his that I should. Maybe a valid test of this would be to name the poets whose work I can quote easily from memory. Well, that would include Frost, cummings, Blake, and Robert Louis Stevenson. I think those I've internalized, and the rest influence me more at the surface of the writing.

My poetic heroes and heroines in contemporary children's poetry would be Jane Yolen, for her eye; Eloise Greenfield, for her ear; Judith Viorst, for the psychology; and Arnold Adoff, for the sociology. I try to read widely, like everyone does, but at the same time I find it can be wise to avoid the poets you admire most—precisely so they don't influence you. It's too easy to let their words take over your poems.

JC: Tell us about your process of composing.

MS: I usually begin by writing down an idea for a poem, a first line, or an image on any old scrap of paper that is handy. That means at my office you'll find hopeful scribbles on phone notes, sticky pads, and the backs of memos. I have to do this because my life is usually too busy for me to finish anything in one sitting. So, these notes to myself help me remember what I was thinking when something important popped into my head. Of course, when I go back to these notes, not all ideas look as good as they did when they first came up. But there is something about getting a thought onto paper that gives it an independent life. I can even pretend it's over on the dresser growing by itself, and maybe when I come back it will unfold into a finished poem and I won't have to do the work. Unfortunately, in real life this seldom happens.

I find when it comes to poetry I need a pencil in my hand—as opposed to a keyboard—especially while I am at the drafting stage. I prefer to be in front of a big window so I can look out at the trees or animals that scurry by. What the world looked like through various windows at different places where I have lived shows up directly in many of the poems in *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*. Readers will especially notice the seasons coming and going in these poems. Many were drafted at the kitchen table in a duplex where we lived for a time in Urbana, Illinois. From that table I could look out a patio door and see the grass changing color, or leaves drifting by, or piles of snow forming as the seasons changed. To get any kind of creativity kindled, I need to be at least in view of the natural world. That is why windows are so important to me. I can write outside, but most of the time that is a little too distracting. Give me a good window, and I'm ready to go.

There is a poem called "The Setting Moon" in *A Moon in Your Lunch Box* that came to be because of a spectacular view I had through a window. I was attending a conference in Seattle, and my hotel room overlooked Puget Sound. While I was there the moon was full. When I would get up early in the morning to write, the moon, who had been up all night, would be lowering itself in a very tired fashion into the waves. That spectacular view, and the resulting image, led to the writing of one of my favorite poems.

JC: How would you describe yourself as a writer?

MS: I am a "slug-it-out" writer. This comes from my experience in the world of the office where I write on deadline and for practical purposes. I am an editor and a bureaucrat, and it seems everything I write at the office needs to be done yesterday. Many of my work habits, for good or bad, carry over into my writing for children.

JC: A hallmark of your poetry is the blending of two types of repetition in the lines. The first type is mirror repetition, which appears at the end of poems like "Changes," "Neighbors," and "First Frost." In these instances, exact repetition of a key line produces great emphasis and sets up the reader for a nice bit of reflection related to the thoughts in the lines. The other type has to do with repetition of a key word or phrase throughout a poem. This is seen in poems like "Mud love" where the word "mud" is repeated often and "Small miracles" where "I bought" is repeated often (all from *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*). In these instances, the repetition serves as a unifying device in the poems; it holds the images together.

MS: At times I wonder if it isn't too heavy-handed, but I like repetition. Repetition at the end of the poem does produce that bit of reflection you mention. It creates the "miles to go before I sleep" effect you see more often in poetry—like Frost's—of an earlier time. I'm sure it also works as a unifying device, as Gertrude Stein says somewhere. I don't approach repetition very analytically while I'm composing—if it appears, it appears. But I do work on this more consciously in the drafts.

It also seems to me that repetition enhances the music of the poem. When you repeat a line at the end of a poem, maybe more of a local effect is achieved. It feels good to the ear in the way a repeated musical chord is pleasing to a listener—like "Amen" at the end of a hymn—and it gives that sense of closure. It turns you back toward the poem and lets you reflect. On the other hand, a repetition that is carried throughout the poem creates more of a global effect. That is, it makes the reader retain a word or phrase or sound in the ear over a longer period of time before it supplies the closure a reader needs. But who knows? Really, I'm making this up as I go along. But what I personally find most interesting about repetition is the piling up of similar sounds and meanings. It's almost as if the repeating doubles the weight of a poem. It presses the reader to look for more meaning than he or she would have thought was there otherwise. What I'm really saying is this: Repetition becomes incantation—it pushes the reader toward the realm of magic.

JC: Another characteristic of your poetry is use of shape or arrangement of lines to capture the actions being described within. This can be seen in a poem like "I love autumn," in which the shape reflects the fall and sway of the leaves. In "The first mosquito," the shape actually reflects the movements of the mosquito (both from *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*). What is your philosophy related to this use of shape and arrangement in poetry?

MS: I think my philosophy about shape is that every poem has a shape—even those that don't seem to. We don't think about this very often, because most poems come in a shape that says to the reader, "All clear—ordinary poem coming up." Then the reader settles into a standard left to right, top to bottom orientation. In this structure we also expect spaces between stanzas—another feature of shape, when you think about it. It may not seem like it at first, but this standard shape does influence how we read and respond to a poem. It sets up all sorts of expectations for the reader.

The shape of a concrete poem has a different purpose. It doesn't want to look ordinary. The shape wants to be a full partner in communicating what the poem is presenting. So for me, the shape of a concrete poem isn't a gimmick, although I understand some readers relate to it in that way. For me, the arrangement of the text isn't in any way subordinate to the text itself or to the semantics of the poem; it's working in a complementary role. As such, I think the shape should get just as much attention, and sometimes maybe more attention, than the text. All of this is a challenge to the poet, because it isn't always easy to bring shape and text together in perfect harmony. And for some readers, an unusual shape can be alarming. Their shape sensors say, "Look out—unusual poem coming up!" In these cases, the shape can make the whole poem too difficult for them to take in stride; the shape becomes too distracting. That's too bad, in my opinion, but you have to keep it in mind when you're messing around with conventions.

JC: It doesn't take a reader long to notice that the tone of your poems matches and reflects the mysteries and superstitions of childhood ("Bubble gum," "Making faces," "Small miracles," all from *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*). Many contemporary poets build upon the wonder of childhood, but you focus more upon a side of that wonder that is a balance of the real and the fantastic, the everyday and the imaginative. Children do reach a point when they become focused upon reality, but at the same time they wonder if it isn't possible for the fantastic to be blended with this reality. In "Making faces," this is shown when we wonder if, when making a face, there is a chance the face will stay that way forever. Could this really happen, or is it just the fantastic? Your poetry sits at this intersection of imagination and reality.

MS: My daughter has said, "It is a little-known fact that Michael Spooner is a sixth grader at heart and not a grown-up at all." I suppose there is some truth in that—I hope there is.

There is the real world in the poems, but there is also this world of fantasy, a sort of idealized world that children in about sixth grade are struggling to leave behind them. I think "intersection" may be a good way of describing this period, because an intersection tries to accommodate movement from several directions. As a writer, I am interested in those impossible dreams we have as children, the fantasies we'd like to impose on the real world. There is a comfort in the escape that those fantasies represent. They provide a momentary "ideal reality." I was thinking about this issue when I wrote "How things come to be" (from *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*). In this poem the speaker is finding out what we all come to discover sooner or later: The world is bigger than we are. This realization is hard for us to accept. As children we tend to assume that if we haven't seen something or someone, then they don't really exist. When we do have a new experience, it's not hard to imagine that magical powers are at work within us that create whatever is new. Eventually, of course, we cross this intersection and find adult reality staring us blandly in the face.

JC: Of all the imagery in your poetry, tactile imagery has the greatest effect and is the driving force behind the lines. The world you create in your poetry is one to be touched, to be embraced. For instance, in poems like "Mud love" and "Cat's cradle" (both from *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*), central images that are built by the sense of touch become the focus of the lines.

MS: I enjoy language with physical imagery. This may have something to do with my childhood. I grew up essentially in the woods; there was no neighborhood. And as fulfilling as it was in some ways, I remember it as a lonely childhood. In many physical ways it was a real pain. Because we lived so far from town, city services didn't reach us. Therefore, we didn't have some of the physical amenities like indoor plumbing, electricity, and telephone service that most other kids I knew did have in their homes. So there was always water to fetch, wood to chop, brush to clear, animals to feed. To a kid, all this physical work can be less than exciting. But perhaps among the things this work gave to me was a sense of touch: the bark of a tree under my hand, the mud under my shoes, the squeak of snow as I walked. But honestly, when I write, I very seldom set out with the purpose to stir up the sense of touch; it simply happens. Or else my editor censors everything else.

In "Cat's cradle," we see fingers and hands passing string back and forth. The images there are tactile, I agree, but to me what is dominant in that piece is more of the metaphor of the string game itself, built through the images. This is our life that we are passing from hand to hand, and we need to be more aware of the patterns that create us. It's a very tactile, hands-on approach to life, an approach I probably try to live out in my poetry.

JC: A signature poem, "Close this book," appears at the end of *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*. Here you speak directly to your readers and tell them that if they aren't careful, they might end up responding to the poetry by writing their own. What other types of response do you hope for from your readers?

MS: I'd like readers to experience that intersection of the real and the fantastic. I want children to feel both their place in the natural world and their potential in the world. I hope to enhance their experience of the physical realities around them and their sense of how those same elements and forces are at work within themselves. I want them to come out of a poem with a feeling like the one I'm trying to express in "I am not contained between my hat and boots" (from *A Moon in Your Lunch Box*). I want them to say to themselves, as it says in the poem, "The sun is my right eye;/the moon is my left eye"—and to know there is a lot more between their hat and boots than they are usually told. When I share a poem—mine or someone else's—with children and I can see they come close to a feeling like this, then the poem is doing what I like it to do best.

JC: How would you like to see your poetry, and the poetry of others, introduced to young readers?

MS: I think it is important for teachers to demystify poetry. It is unfortunate, but poetry has developed a mystique about it that has, ironically, rendered it irrelevant in the daily experience of most folks. We have made poetry irrelevant by honoring it too much; somehow we have made it seem that poetry is so special the average person can't hope to understand it.

I would like to see those who share poetry with the young take a hands-on approach and share all types of poetry with them. Not all these experiences will be great. That's okay. But children should be shown all branches and possibilities of poetry.

JC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

MS: I have maybe four projects for children going now—I can only do this part-time, you know—and one scholarly/professional piece, which doesn't count but is a lot of fun. The first is essentially finished—or the writing is. It will be a picture book for young to middle readers, called *The Legend of the Snowshoes: An Ojibwe Story* (1994). This is a retelling of a traditional Native American story, which I wrote with a cousin of mine who is a member of the Anishinabe nation (Ojibwe) in the Great Lakes area. She learned the legend as a child in the early 1900s, and we decided it was time to write it down. It's a wonderful story about character, imagination, love, and—oh yes—the invention of the snowshoes. Henry Holt will publish it.

The other projects include a new collection of poems with a working title of *The Six Senses*—unfinished but coming along; another Anishinabe story, this one about Old Meshikee, the Turtle—still revising; and a long narrative poem I've just started that I hope to turn into a picture book about an especially cold winter and a Malamute puppy who barely survives it.

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

MS: It might be just to repeat a theme or two we have raised here. I'd like to demystify writing, especially poetry, so that readers can be more comfortable with it—this includes concrete poetry, of course. I know smart, conscientious grown-ups—teachers, for example—who say things like, "I'm just not good with poetry; I don't know what to do with it." Well, I think it might help not to take it so seriously. I'd encourage them to find their own intersection of the real and the fantastic, and enjoy some time there.

It's funny, but a lot of readers who are also interested in writing this stuff seem to want Advice—with a capital A—and, sadly, this can only come out simplistically. What I know about the best writers is that they are very disciplined people who focus on working their gift. This is not a simple matter. But, for what it's worth, here's my three-step formula for children who would be writers: 1) Don't watch TV, ever; 2) don't eat junk food; and 3) read and write something—anything—every single day. The rest will take care of itself.

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Constance Levy

Readers of Constance Levy's poetry will experience the beauty and wonder of nature. Through a masterful blending of visual imagery and sound effects, readers are introduced to a symphony of the sights and sounds of the natural world. As she writes, Levy draws from vivid memories of childhood and mixes these with current experiences. In doing so she captures and makes use of what she calls the "universal links" in childhood experience: "digging for China," playing games, twirling in circles until one is too dizzy to stand. These experiences establish a common bond between reader and print.

Constance Levy's love for poetry began at a very young age when her mother read poems to her. Today Levy, who spends a great amount of time sharing her poetry in the schools, has strong beliefs related to how children should be introduced to poetry. Above all, she believes that parents, teachers, and poets need to remember what it feels like to be a child so that children can be encouraged to revel in the simple pleasure of language. She also believes poetry should be shared every day in the schools—and not just in isolated poetry units.

For Constance Levy the world is a never-ending source of joy and delight, a feeling that becomes quite clear to readers of her poetry. Today, she lives with her husband, Monty, in St. Louis, Missouri.

JC: Please tell us about your family and where you grew up.

CL: I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, in a three-story, six-family apartment with my parents, older sister, maternal grandmother, and my mother's brother and sister, my favorite uncle and aunt. We lived on the top floor, and in spite of some physical discomforts such as temperamental plumbing and the usual apartment house bugs, I never wanted to live anywhere else. I knew people had grander homes and more creature comforts, but I was sure we had more fun in our neighborhood. With a warm and caring family and a lot of friends, I was quite content to be me.

My parents had both immigrated to this country as children around the turn of the century. My mother arrived from Russia when she was seven and my father at age fourteen from Lithuania.

Neither of them was able to attend high school because they had to go to work, a necessity in those days. So, beyond elementary school they were self-educated. My father was an avid reader of newspapers and magazines, and my mother was a lover of poetry. She remembered poems she had learned in school and frequently recited them for me. I really loved listening; she recalled them with such pleasure, and the music of her words introduced me to another dimension of language. I am convinced that my love of poetry began there.

My father operated a men's clothing store across the Mississippi River in East St. Louis, Illinois. At that time East St. Louis was a bustling town where farmers would bring their livestock to the stockyards. His store was near these stockyards. He worked long hours, but on Sundays he always found interesting places to take us in St. Louis. The zoo was one of his favorites. We knew every inch of the zoo and much of surrounding Forest Park.

Aunts and uncles and cousins visited us often. One uncle played the piano for sing-alongs, and everyone talked and joked and enjoyed each other's company. For me, the best company was that of people who could make you laugh. The way you say things to make something humorous has always fascinated me. I didn't realize it then, but I know now that there is a close relationship between jokes and poetry, the choice of the right words for sound as well as meaning, the timing, the rhythm, and the effective punch line. Somehow I believe now that my feeling for the art of words found a lot of nourishment back then with the family conversations and joking, and maybe we should add Jack Benny and Fred Allen on the radio. And I'm glad there was no home television at that time, so we were able to exercise our visual imagination.

We found pleasure in simple activities. For example, techniques for cooling off in summer became entertainment: a ride out to the country in the family car, a black Chevy, on summer nights, with an ice cream cone on the way back. Or, we would join the crowds at a special place in Forest Park that has a lovely green hill, perfect for rolling down, and a covered pavilion on top, where the grown-ups just sat and talked and appreciated a respite from the heat. It was a wonderful, more innocent childhood than many children have today, and I'm grateful for it. I still take pleasure in simple things.

JC: What were you like as a child?

CL: I'll tell you how my favorite aunt, the one who lived with us, has described me as a child: a cheerful optimist, always curious and creative, and a skinny little "tomboy" who liked to play marbles. Here's something I remember well—so it must have been important to me. It was probably the first time a word really intrigued me. My first-grade teacher, Miss Yule, wrote the word "chrysanthemum" on the board and showed us its secrets—syllables that untangled all those letters and put them in neat little bundles of sound. I thought that was a beautiful word, and I taught myself to spell it. I still feel that it is my word. Another breakthrough in solving some of the world's mysteries happened, I think, around that same time. I figured out on my own why a tire is flat only on the bottom. I thought these were great achievements!

It wasn't all rosy, though. One of my secret fears, and I think all children have these fears, was of catching leprosy. I was terribly worried. I saw pictures about it in *Life* magazine, and for a while I tested my finger tips under hot water every night to be sure I hadn't lost feeling in them; that was a sure sign. It's funny, but when one of my children admitted to me that he was very much afraid of volcanoes, I understood. St. Louis had neither leprosy nor volcanoes nor even monsters under the beds, but children's fears are very imaginative!

I have many other vivid memories of childhood. When I was very small I was always digging holes in the ground. I really thought I could reach China if I dug deeply enough. I wasn't sure, but just maybe . . . . You find interesting things when you dig, not just worms and rocks. I found arrowheads often, sometimes even the prized flint arrowheads. I also remember playing with ants a lot and letting them crawl over my hands. I liked the tickle, a lingering sensation even in memory. I think there are many experiences like these that we all have in common, and poetry brings that out. I mean, a person doesn't just go around talking about ants and such, but if a poet happens to write a poem about it, you may read it and say, "Yes, I remember doing that, too." Then a universal link is established by the poetry.

I also loved big expanses of grass like those we found in Forest Park. We would run out in a field and twirl around until we were too dizzy to stand. If there was a nice, soft-looking green hill, we rolled down like logs. I can still feel the softness and the scratchiness and smell the earth and the greenness. I'm just now working on a poem about that. When I see such a hill now I still get the urge.

I wasn't a solitary nose-in-the-book type at all. Many writers were, but I was definitely not that. Oh, I loved books, especially fairy tales, folktales, and poems, but my favorite activity was being outside playing with friends. Most of my friends were boys, because they played more interesting games. The neighborhood was rich with children, so I never lacked for playmates. Right behind the yard of our apartment was a block-long car barn and open tracks, where city streetcars were kept. We constantly heard these cars and the noisy rattle and clink of wheels during our games and at all hours of the day and night. I never minded that, really; in fact, I found it an exotic place, like living near the ocean. Of course, when our baseballs went over the fence and we had to retrieve them it was a nuisance, and maybe even a little dangerous with the cars coming and going. But children love a little danger. In addition to marbles, we played flipping baseball cards, jacks (for the girls), step-ball, cops and robbers, kick-the-can, red-light green-light, and more. We were also pretty silly at times. I can remember how we picked up fresh wads of tar from the street when the tar machine was on the block and chewed them like gum. When I told my children this they responded, "Oh, Mother, how gross!"

But you know, I think when you remember some of the strange things you did and thought as a child, you can understand how children think and how they do the things they do. Parents and teachers need to remember what it feels like to be a child. Poets need to do this, too; they need this memory to capture childhood in the lines. I know that today when I write, I mix current experience with my childhood. I reach back all the time to try to recall my impressions. I think most children's writers do that.

JC: From this wonderful childhood, what was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

CL: I think I've always felt a spark as far as poetry is concerned. When I look back, I get the feeling that I always *thought* in poetry. It was just a matter of learning how to write so I could capture some of these thoughts. I started writing poems when I was about five or six, and I wrote all the way through elementary school, writing especially for teachers who encouraged it. I think that's so important. If teachers encourage children to express themselves and give them opportunities, they will respond. I see that all the time as I visit with children in the schools. After elementary school there was a long lag in my writing. I didn't really return to writing poetry until my own children inspired me.

JC: Along with those influences, who were the writers who most influenced you as you developed as a writer?

CL: I can't say that one or two particular writers influenced me when I was a child. I remember Christina Rossetti's "Who Has Seen the Wind?"

and Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Swing" most of all. My swing was in the schoolyard, but Stevenson's let me see rivers and cattle and countryside through his eyes. And even the poems that were less appealing to my interests often sounded good to me.

As to how other poets have influenced my writing as an adult, I really couldn't say. I've never been aware of any influence. But because I enjoy reading children's poetry so much and read a lot of it, I would say that all of children's poetry influences me in some way. That's why I want children to have a healthy and varied diet of it, too.

Reviewers of *I'm Going to Pet a Worm Today and Other Poems* (1991) have suggested that my poems bring to mind Emily Dickinson, Aileen Fisher, Valerie Worth, and Lilian Moore, all poets I admire. I think we are drawn to writers that we share something with, those who write the way we write or the way we would like to write, those who see the world in a similar light, or who simply delight us. And maybe it is also because they reassure us that we are on the right track. I can say that Lilian Moore is a poet whose work means much to me. A very relaxing interlude for me is a cup of tea and Lilian Moore's *Something New Begins*. She gives us so many levels of enjoyment and sets a high standard. I read and re-read her poems, not to imitate them but because her skill is so evident, and her poems make me feel so good, so energized that they seem to free me to try something new in my own lines. So in that sense, every poem that moves me, and there are many, has its influence on me.

JC: Please tell us how your publishing career came about.

CL: The first poems I had published weren't even submitted by me! They were poems sent to the *Journal of Childhood Education* by the director of my oldest son's nursery school. At that time this director knew the editor of the journal. I really didn't know a thing about publishing. I wasn't paid for the poems, but it was really nice to see them in print. That was way back in 1959. After that I remember the director showing me a little book of poems by Myra Cohn Livingston. There weren't many new books of poetry written specifically for children at that time, at least none that I had found, so I was very impressed by this book. I looked at it and thought to myself, "Maybe I can do it!" So I tried, and I started receiving my first rejection notices. I realized that this wasn't going to be so easy after all. I don't know if my poems were that good then. When I got the rejection notices I realized I needed to work more on the poems. But I did get a few personal notes from editors, and those meant a lot to me. Some just said that poetry was very hard to sell; some still say that today. I saved many of the rejection notices, and from time to time I like to go back and look at them. At that time, of course, they were devastating.

The first poems I was paid for were those published in *Instructor* magazine during the years between 1967 and 1971. Then, I read somewhere about a new children's literary magazine, *Cricket*, that was about to begin publication, so I sent in a group of poems and they accepted two of them. Those poems appeared in 1975, and I have had two others published in *Cricket* in the years since. I finally began to think of myself as a real writer. Until someone publishes you, it's not easy to keep your confidence intact. I also started to get requests for reprints of these poems, because *Cricket* has a broad circulation. Requests came from Canada, Australia, and Great Britain, and some of these were for inclusion in school reading anthologies. This made me very happy because I am a former teacher and have always believed in the importance of poetry in the reading program.

However, even with this publishing success, I didn't try book publishers again for a long, long time. I think you really get cold feet after you have been rejected from book publishers. But, I kept going by sending poems to magazines. One day, while working in the schools as a writer for the Missouri Arts Council, a little second-grade boy asked me the BIG question: "But have you had a book published?" Oh, from the mouths of babes . . . I realized that if I wanted any real respect as a writer, even from second graders, I had better get a book of poems together. So I tried again and got three rejections back right away. I did finally get used to the rejections—and eventually I didn't even hold it against the mailman. There were times when I just didn't like seeing that truck! I always tell people not to do this, but I stopped submitting book manuscripts for a while. However, I never stopped writing. I now have to admit that in a way, I'm glad some of my early work didn't get published because I don't think I really would be happy with some of the poems now. After a time, because I do read a lot of children's poetry books—I have shelves full—I had a good idea of who was publishing what. One day I realized I hadn't sent a manuscript to Margaret McElderry. I remember thinking, "She publishes several excellent poets—why does she need me?" I figured I might as well get a rejection from her too, so I sent a manuscript. I waited and waited and even wrote a follow-up letter because I didn't hear anything for quite some time. They wrote back and told me the manuscript was still being considered, and after a while Margaret McElderry herself asked me to send in a few more poems. I sent a bunch more, because I had hundreds to draw from. At last, one day I received THE letter. I knew it was good news because it was a letter, not a large envelope with my own handwriting on it, which would have meant the return of the manuscript. I was so excited I couldn't read the letter. My eyes blurred. I had to ask my husband to read it for me. After thirty years of trying, you can imagine how I felt. It really was dreamlike.

I think it's good for children to hear stories like this because it is important for them to know that rejection comes along all through life. You just have to keep on going and say to yourself, "I *can* do it!" And keep working to improve. Never let rejection get you down. Especially in writing, that just comes with the territory.

JC: Please tell us about your process of composing. How do you work as a writer?

CL: Most of my poems develop over time. I jot down notes related to something I think of or something I see: an experience, an image, a line, a few lines together, or simply a few words that sound good together. Then I work on a new poem for a while, but rarely do I ever complete it to my satisfaction at once. I'll work it over, sometimes coming back to it several months or sometimes even years later. I edit an awful lot. Often I end up with something completely different from what I started with. I don't think that is surprising; I think a lot of poets do that. However, it is surprising to me every single time I do it because all this editing is not what I had in mind when I started the poem. The way it comes out is just a wonderful surprise. I have lots of pieces of poems, poems to be revised, and notes that I finally learned to put into a folder instead of scattering them around the house. If I don't have something on my mind, I'll open up the folder and pick something to work through. I also have piles of work in progress, and my office is terribly cluttered and an awful mess. I always apologize when someone comes in, but that's the way I work.

I also like to have many uninterrupted hours at a time, not an hour here and an hour there. I think developing a "mind mood" is terribly important. It takes me a while to get deeply into this mood. It's like a different state of consciousness. It is quite intense and emotionally draining when I'm creating at full speed, and I love that "high" when something works. I feel like Orville and Wilbur Wright—I'm flying! Sometimes, though, I work on a poem and think it's great, but the next day I don't like it at all.

JC: Can you illustrate this process by telling us about the writing of a poem or two from *I'm Going to Pet a Worm Today and Other Poems*?

CL: One of my favorite poems in the collection is "Dawn Watch." It is a poem I always read to children when I go into the schools after I tell how it came about. I was taking a walk one morning before the sun had come up. Sometimes early in the morning there is a seepage of light that comes around the horizon. The sun isn't up yet, but there is a certain light that comes up. Well, this particular morning I looked up into the sky suddenly and realized there was a line of demarcation, almost a straight line, directly above me. It was still night on one side of this line with the moon still shining and the stars still twinkling. On the other side there was a yellowish light. There were no stars or other signs of night on this side of the line. I was very excited about this because I was walking right down the middle. I put one arm out and it was in night. I put the other arm out and it was in day. I just walked a while that way. I was very excited about this and started thinking of the poem as I was walking home. It was very frustrating because I had to keep saying lines over and over as I walked home so I wouldn't forget them. When I got home I jotted down a few words and lines. And, as I always do, I came back to it later, worked it over and over, and eventually finished it. I shouldn't say "finished it." It's true, as someone else wrote, that a poem is never finished—just abandoned. My husband has told me on occasion that I must learn to let go of a poem.

In contrast to this was the writing of "Rah, Rah Peas!" I wrote this one because I really had to tell how I felt about raw peas. To this day, I love eating fresh, raw green peas right out of the pod. Many children don't even know where peas come from. I found that out while sharing poetry with children in the schools. You learn so much about them. Well, when I would tell children how much I love green peas, some would say, "Aw, peas!" I remember saying, "Don't say, 'Aw, peas.' Try some raw peas!" I knew right away this was a line I could use. I started working on this poem, and each time I came back to it I realized it was starting to sound like a cheer. I decided that was what the poem wanted to be, so I went along. Now when I do the poem in schools with children or in workshops with teachers, we do it as a cheer. We all stand up and do cheerleader movements while shouting, "Don't say, 'Aw, peas!' Try some raw peas!" At the very end, after we say the last line, we throw our arms out and say, "Hooray!" and clap. Usually they want to do it over and over, and they have had marvelous times—so have I! It's good exercise, too!

JC: Where do you prefer to do most of your writing?

CL: The notes and thinking I do anywhere. Something will grab me, and I drift into "poetry-think." Taking a walk is one of my best places for thinking about poems. The shower is probably the second best. However, both are extremely difficult places to write. As far as finishing the writing and doing the polishing and editing, I like to do that in my office at my desk. My office is a very private place. I have room for a nice office now because all the children are grown and have moved out.

JC: In your poetry we find a delicate balance of sound effects and visual imagery. This is seen in a poem like "The Old Leaves" from *I'm Going to Pet a Worm Today.* Both elements work in harmony so that each poem is fresh and unique, and through these elements the collection as a whole functions like a symphony of the natural world.

CL: Those are things I really hope come together in my work. I just love the combination of sight and sound. This combination comes naturally as I work and rework a poem until it feels right. Sometimes I find a poem needs enriching in a specific area. At other times I actually have to trim something. The sound, the visual imagery, the rhythm, the appearance of the poem—all are very important to me. I also like to have playfulness with the words. This would also include how the words are spaced on the page. If I find a poem is getting "too adult," too rich, or too heavy, I tell myself, "Lighten up!" However, I would say that I create my poems a lot more by feel than by consciously analyzing them as they are written. Remember the story about the centipede who walked very well with all his hundred legs and never had a problem? Then someone asked him how in the world he kept all his legs in harmony, and it tripped him up. Sometimes I'm that centipede. Sometimes analyzing is not the best thing for me to do.

JC: Magnificent use of alliteration is a hallmark of your poetry. The repetition of sounds most often works to create the action or movement being described in the lines. This is seen in a poem like "Weeds" where alliteration involving the "s" and "w" sounds reflects the swish of walking in the weeds. It can also be seen in a poem like "The Business of Bees" where repetition of the "b" sound reflects the buzz of the bees being described (both from *I'm Going to Pet a Worm Today*). This is not typical onomatopoeia, where a word will carry sound and meaning together. In your poems, not just a few words but a whole collection of sounds will work in harmony to produce this combination of sound and action.

CL: Most of this comes naturally for me. At the same time, some of this is conscious, I suppose. I loved writing "Weeds" for the very reasons just mentioned. When I share poems with children I tell them to listen to the sounds and see if they hear anything special. They always find the good stuff. I never tell them to analyze.

JC: Your poetry in *I'm Going to Pet a Worm Today and Other Poems* explores the beauty and wonder of the natural world. Representative of your work in this collection is "Out," in which the speaker prefers being out rather than in the house. How close are your own personal views to the views of the speaker of this poem?

CL: I think you have to write what grabs you, and I am just fascinated with nature. "Out" is the real me. I love being outside. I can just stand and look at a bug or a sunset for a long time. This summer I was watching spiders weave their webs, and even though I have, of course, seen this before, I was totally engrossed. Nature excites me as it does the children.

JC: In this natural world we also find your own special brand of personification: leaves snoring in "The Old Leaves," the crows chatting in "Crow Tree," the water coming alive in "What Water Wishes." Your use of personification is different from the mainstream in that it is tinged with humor. Your poems, through this special blend, are quite funny.

CL: I love humor, and I want children to have this humor in the poetry. I am so pleased when something happens in the lines that is humorous. Everything seems so serious for children today. Maybe through my poetry they will escape from this for a time. And humor is good health food.

JC: Related to this, how would you like to see your poetry introduced to young readers?

CL: I love introducing my poetry to youngsters myself, but of course I can't make it out to all the schools. They are very much interested in the stories of how I happened to write certain poems. As far as teachers and others who share poetry, first of all I'd like them to present it just for the pleasure of listening to it, in the same way that stories are read. I think poetry should be used every day in the schools. Poems can also be used in relation to all sorts of subjects across the curriculum. If they are studying insects, then read a poem about an insect. Poems can be used in math, science, art, physical education, during lunch—everywhere! Children can use some of that "lightening up" to help them get through the heavy part of the day.

When I go into the schools I talk about some of the things the poem is touching on and engage the children in discussion. I want them to use *their* language, too. I think this is very important. I like to bring their thoughts out as a result of reading a poem or introducing a poem. We don't let children talk enough about their thoughts and experiences unless they are subject-oriented. See where the poem takes them. Encourage them to pick up on the language in a poem. If they find some new words that are interesting or new ways words are used, they should be allowed to talk about this, to collect words and patterns of speech. Maybe they will then use these words in different ways and improve their own communication and language skills. I like the mystery and excitement of language, and I think poems also help children feel this.

It's natural for poetry to inspire children to write their own poetry. Poems inspire poems. For years I have used poetry with young readers specifically for this purpose. There is no question about it: When children hear poetry often, they write poetry. I hope my poems are read aloud but are just one part of their poetry diet—it should be well balanced! There are many other poets to know, too.

JC: Other than writing one of their own poems after reading one of yours, what response do you hope for from your readers?

CL: I want them first to enjoy the poems and read them again and again. Too much can be missed with just one reading. I also hope that the poems make them look at the world a little differently, sharpen their senses a little bit, make them laugh, arouse their curiosity, brighten their lives. I hope they will memorize a few favorites; that way they'll have them as companions for life. Poems are good and faithful friends.

JC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future? Which projects are you working on at present?

CL: I do have a new book of poems, *A Tree Place And Other Poems,* which is scheduled to be published in February 1994 by the same publisher, Margaret McElderry. This collection will be mostly nature poems about such things as a wasp, a hermit crab, a moonlit moth, a rock in my shoe, a volcano. I have dabbled in other genres, but what gives me a real kick, a real thrill, is a poem. There is a wonderful feeling about finishing a poem and liking it. I don't get quite the same feeling with other types of writing. But I do have a few projects in mind that interest me.

JC: What suggestions have you for children who are interested in writing poetry?

CL: First, it helps to read poetry and explore the different ways to write poems. Find out what you like. Discover what in a poem makes it work for you. Keep a sharp eye, ear, and nose out for interesting things around you in your world. Start with very small poems. Be curious about what you observe, curious enough that if you see something interesting you might want to know more about it. Whether it is owls or water lilies or butterflies or rivers or whatever, get more information about it. Even if you don't use all, or any, of that information in your poem, you're going to know a good deal more about your subject and get a feel for it, be closer to it.

I would also say never lose your sense of wonderment or excitement in discovering something. All children have that, and adults who write poetry for children keep theirs tuned up and use it all the time. It is also important to keep notes because you may think of something great to write in a poem but forget it later if it isn't written down. Keep paper and pencil around you so you can get to them quickly. I always tell young writers, "Observe, reflect, and record."

At the same time, always be looking for new words and don't forget to try new ways to use the old words. Words are like paint. A dot is a dot, but it can be the pupil of an eye, a button, a crumb, a contrast to another dot. Words are like that too. You can use a word one way and it doesn't have an impact, but use it another way and it has new life. Poems can be made better by finding words that do a little more, by using words that give a little more imagery, better sound, or condense a lot into a little space. Enjoy playing with words and experimenting with them.

Remember also, do not concentrate upon making the poems rhyme. You first have to say what you want to say and keep the whole poem interesting. Rhymes will sometimes fall into place, and then you can grab them and work with them. But you shouldn't concentrate upon the rhyme. Let the poem take you where it wants to go; it might take you to a better place than you had in mind originally.

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

CL: To my readers I would say I hope my poems make you happy, give you something to think about, and make you want to write your own poems. For teachers and others who work with children, I would like them to think about how important poetry is in the lives of children and to learning. I was a teacher early in my career. I taught first and second grade. While teaching, I had my own ideas about how reading skills should be taught or acquired—mainly through a combination of a variety of reading material, listening to stories and poems, and creative writing. I still feel that way. After I retired from teaching to raise my children, I went back to school and studied more literature and more about the reading process. I became certified as a reading specialist, but I decided that rather than teaching full time I would be more effective by becoming a visiting writer in the schools for the Missouri Arts Council. I found as I went into the schools to read poems and share ideas with them that children would come to me with little pieces of paper with poems on them that they had written while I was reading and talking with them. That's when I realized that children really can write poems very easily when they are inspired by hearing poems read aloud. They all enjoyed listening. They seemed to have been starved for lack of it and wanted to hear their own favorites over and over. Teachers who bring poetry into their classrooms become as enthusiastic about it as I am. They find children are writing things that are beyond what they had expected of them. And their reading skills and interests, even their self-esteem, are greatly enhanced. My favorite comment from teachers who have witnessed the results is, "I had no idea he could do that!" Poetry can do amazing things for children.

I also suggest that teachers try their own hand at writing poetry. It's personally rewarding, and it gives you an "insider's" feel for the medium—whether you're encouraging children to write or just selecting poems to present. And you never know what might happen; I've found some promising poets in my teacher workshops who had no idea THEY could do that!

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Nikki Giovanni

Nikki Giovanni, through her poetry, tries to "give honor and show respect for children." She does this, in part, through the creation of warm, caring relationships in her poems. Giovanni gives voice to the feelings of children and through this voice presents the world in a positive, happy light. In her poetry, characters talk to each other, listen to each other, love and respect each other. As a result, her poems are uplifting and inspiring.

Giovanni's poetry for older children has an additional layer of "social consciousness." In these poems, readers will examine such subjects as a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and feeling pride in family heritage (Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People, 1993)*. Here, too, she creates powerful characters, but they are presented to help instill compassion and empathy in the reader. Giovanni says, "If we can empathize, then we will care about what happens to people. We must use our empathy to make ourselves and the people around us better." In her poetry, all people are important; all people are special.*

Today, Nikki Giovanni lives in Christianburg, Virginia.

VC: Please tell us about your childhood.

NG: I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. My parents moved to Cincinnati when I was two months old, but my grandparents lived in Knoxville, and I spent most of my summers there. So, I'm actually an Appalachian. It was quite pleasant there for a child. To this day I like mountains and rivers, like those I saw near Knoxville.

I used to draw a lot when I was little and was always drawing islands. This carried over into my reading. I remember I loved reading *Treasure Island*. I even made treasure maps. I had a good time doing that.

In school I enjoyed English and history. I still do. I've always been interested in systems and governments that humans have created throughout history. Those areas are really fascinating to me. I'm a product of segregated education, so like many people of my age, my science background is not so good. We are just now seeing young black scientists who are around thirty years old, because they had the facilities in school. We didn't. I think it's fair to say my generation didn't have a lot in terms of education, compared with today.

VC: What was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

NG: Benjamin Franklin said, "Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other." I think he was right, because there's something to be said about experiencing world travel and things of that nature. But experience can be overblown because I don't think Emily Dickinson walked half a mile from her house and yet she's one of America's great poets. I think she lived a lot in her head, so I believe empathy is much more important than experience. I think you need an interest in people, and I think you need some essential background. You also need to read a lot so that as you begin to write, you're writing about something you know. These were the sparks for me.

VC: Who were the writers who influenced you most as you developed as a writer?

NG: I don't think I had any, and that's not to downplay or overlook the writers that I read. But usually when we say influences or role models, they have no meaning to me. I've always enjoyed reading. I read Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes. I read whatever was in my mother's library, especially a lot of trashy novels.

VC: Please tell us about your early writing experiences.

NG: My age comes into play here because I'm of the generation where we wrote all the time. There was no such thing as writing across the curriculum in school because we were *expected* to write all the time. I'm also a product of the essay examination. The kids don't know about that now. They take a #2 pencil and mark numbers. We were expected to read a question and respond to it in writing, all the time. All my writing was really done in school. I never entered contests or anything like that.

VC: What was your first published piece for young readers?

NG: My first essay was in a now-defunct magazine called *Negro Digest.* They did a college report, and they asked a group of writers to write our views of America. This was in 1961 or 1962. One of the first things I published specifically with young people in mind was a bookmark for National Book Week. It is a poem called "The Reason I Like Chocolate." I was invited to participate because they were asking a number of poets to help promote that special week. I was very proud of that. Not too long afterward, they asked me to do another one, which I thought was quite an honor. Then I was asked to help with a program called Reading

Is Fundamental. Through my work with this RIF program, a book came out of the experience: *Spin a Soft Black Song: Poems for Children* (1971). Those were my early publications for children.

VC: How do you work as a writer? Any habits, customs, or superstitions you observe as you write?

NG: I wouldn't call them superstitions as such, but I do have habits. I'm a very habitual individual. When I write I have my own chair, which means a lot to me. I have my own word processor on which I do my writing. Usually sitting on this word processor is a special cup I use for my coffee. I really get upset if somebody uses my cup. It may sound funny, but I feel comfortable with that cup.

VC: Could you illustrate your work as a writer by providing an anecdote related to the writing of a specific poem or collection?

NG: In *Spin a Soft Black Song* I wanted to respond to the youngsters I was seeing daily. I was working with the RIF program at the time. We would go into neighborhoods in places like Harlem and talk to the kids. The kids were always asking, "What do you do?" I would say that I was a poet. They would say, "Well, write a poem about me." I'd ask them what I should write about. They would say certain things, and I would watch them so I could remember their words and actions later when I wrote. One of my really wonderful experiences of all this was writing the poem "Two Friends" for Lydia and Shirley. They were two friends who came up to me and said, "Write a poem for us. We're friends." I looked at them and they had all these stripes on, so I wrote about that too. They were just delighted. I gave them the original poem. As a matter of fact, I gave all the kids the original poems because I had copies of them for myself. It's really funny because who knows what has happened to Lydia and Shirley. Today they may not even remember they were the kids that poem is about. In all those poems I was just trying to capture something in the children I was seeing. This is really what I try to do as a writer.

VC: The introductory comments to *Spin a Soft Black Song* set the tone for the volume: warm, friendly, inviting. You create a link between author/illustrator and reader that is seldom seen in books for children. What first made you think of using this type of introduction?

NG: It seemed normal because I was just trying to talk to people, to communicate with them. Even when I'm having a poetry reading I usually have things to say about the poems to get the audience prepared. Prose is more common and natural for most people, and you really have to establish your voice first. It seemed to me that if I was going to introduce the poems and if I was going to put something in front of them, I should let people know who I was. The poetry speaks for itself. Why would I use a poem to introduce a poem? I used prose because it seemed most natural.

VC: The poems in *Spin a Soft Black Song* represent the thoughts and feelings of youngsters ranging in age from five weeks to ten years old. Thus, a "growing up" is seen and felt by the reader. And the ideas presented in the poems get increasingly more sophisticated as each one unfolds.

NG: That structure was used on purpose. The youngest child is about five weeks old. There's another baby poem in there, too. That was the baby of a friend of mine. Once I realized I was doing this whole collection of children and I realized what I had, I wanted to include kids that I knew. I also wanted to use children of friends. My son was two years old when I wrote that collection, so I was child-prone anyway. *Spin a Soft Black Song* came out in 1971 and my son was born in 1969, so he was just an infant. I guess you could say I sort of backed into that structure because it just made sense after I started seeing the poems together.

What I really wanted to do in this collection was show a respect for children. I thought they deserved a voice and that these particular youngsters especially deserved somebody to write about their thoughts and feelings. I think "The Drum" in this collection worked out really well and expresses an important voice. In some of the poems about older kids there were some sophisticated ideas going on, but they were not sophisticated to the point that the youngsters about whom the poems were written would have lost themselves in them. Each could relate to the poems on a level where each could say, "That's me!" I think as the ideas in the poems got older, the readers could relate to the poems on another level by saying, "Oh my. Is that what I was doing then?" I felt that was important.

I have never understood why people don't understand children because we were all children once. I think it's sad when people look at children and see small adults, because they are not. They are their own entity. About every other year I teach children's literature or some form of writing for a young audience. While doing that I keep reminding them that there was an evolution into childhood as we know it. The idea of childhood is actually very new. We have changed our views of childhood greatly through the years, but the human infant is still one of the most vulnerable mammals on earth. We have evolved to the point where we try to protect children as much as possible. And in children's literature we have tried to give them a voice, a place of honor. That is what I have tried to do in my writings, to give honor and show respect for children.

VC: A hallmark of your work as a poet is the creation of warm, caring relationships forged by love and cemented by trust ("Let's Take a Nap," "Daddies," "Two Friends," all from *Spin a Soft Black Song*).

NG: Everything is a relationship. Let me tell you a story. My son is considering law school. He's a senior this year, and I said to him, "You must take a course in contracts. It will be good for you." He said to me that contracts are kind of boring and that he'd rather take something more interesting. I said, "Thomas, *everything* is a contract. The reason contracts are at the heart of law, whether written or unwritten, is that everything is a contract." In the same fashion, "Daddies," "Let's Take a Nap," and "Two Friends" all describe contracts because a relationship is a contract. It is so easy to forget that we can default in a relationship because we think that we haven't entered a contract. I'm simply saying that adults have entered a contract with children. We brought them into the world, and we owe them a certain free passage and safety until they are able to take care of themselves. These are my beliefs and why I write about relationships. Also, I see most relationships as positive. "Let's Take a Nap" was definitely about Thomas and me and our relationship because I'm a napper. I'm a night person and am usually up late. If I had my way, I'd read all night. Because of this, I have always liked to take a nap during the day. When my son was little I'd say, "Let's take a nap." However, he didn't always want to because kids hate naps. I laugh about it now, and I talked about it in the poem, but at least half of the time I'd beat him to sleep. I had to be sneaky about getting him to take a nap. Many days we'd pretend we were having a picnic, which always made it more interesting. I'd say, "Well, let's go on a picnic and we can take a nap after we eat." Then I'd get ready for the picnic, and my nap, by putting all the blankets and quilts on the floor. That way I never had to worry about him falling because we were already on the floor. I'd also bring in our dog, Wendy, and the three of us would curl up and take a nap after we finished the picnic. I tried to show many relationships like this in the collection.

VC: At the same time, one finds very little in the way of the negative or the darker side of life in this collection. In this poetry we find more of a celebration of life.

NG: I don't look at life as negative. I did the poem "Sleep," where the kid sees a rat, because I was compelled to because of the situation. I was working in Harlem and started to see scars, both internal and external, on people. We could tell by looking at some of the children they had been bitten by something, so I felt compelled to write that poem. I think I choose to stress the positive in life because I had a positive childhood.

VC: Even though *Spin a Soft Black Song* was written over twenty years ago, it still holds up for today's readers because of the universal messages found within: the importance of family, the wonder of the universe, being proud of one's own heritage. However, in the poems are some specific references and details that are strictly 1970s: the bugaloo in "Dance Poem," the phrase "right on" in "Some Things Are Funny Like That." What is your philosophy related to the use of the "here and now" in your own writings? In your opinion, how much should a writer use these contemporary slices of existence?

NG: The use of the "here and now" is absolutely essential for the poet. I say that to my classes all the time. Even the great poet Dante used the "here and now." In his poetry he dealt with very real things that were happening in his day. We've lost a lot of his images because of that. Some we know. Some have come down to us through time. This is one of the eternal problems for writers.

I feel there is no such thing as a universal theme. There is no such thing as a universal idea. There are ideas that are expressed so well they become great, and we can connect with them over the centuries. But who can write like that? All I ever say is that I'm going to do the very best I can do at this point in time. If you are specific, you will hit the heart. Each person understands certain things. I really think that music does it a lot better than print because music is the universal language. Poets do it well because people can carry the music of poetry in their hearts and in their heads. Clearly, as poets, we have to be saying something about human conditions in order to make an impression. I'm very proud of *Spin a Soft Black Song* because I feel I did that. My publisher just wrote me and said they are going to do an anniversary edition of it. I'm very happy about this, but I have to tell you I would have been pleased if the poems in *Spin* had simply been given to the kids for whom they were written. What made me happy was that I put the best that I could into the poems for those youngsters.

I say to my students and to young writers all the time that you have to learn to be happy with what you've written. You must know that this is the best that you can do—not the best that can ever be done, but the best that you can do at that point. If you worry about the best that can ever be done, you'll become paralyzed as a writer.

VC: *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People* is a collection for an older audience than the audience for which *Spin a Soft Black Song* was intended. The poems in this collection deal much more with social consciousness. In your opinion, how much did collections like yours foster change, and how much should be done today by poets of all backgrounds to help continue changes in society?

NG: Perhaps a poem helps somebody look at somebody else in a different light; I think that helps people change. It is very difficult to be cruel to people once you've seen them, and people can be characterized well in poetry. The Native Americans have an expression, "Walk a mile in a man's moccasins." If we can empathize, then we will care about what happens to people. We must use our empathy to make ourselves and the people around us better. Poetry can help with this a great deal.

VC: *Vacation Time: Poems for Children* (1980) is a collection of twenty-two new poems. In this collection the poems are lighter and deal more with the common events of growing up: playing in the mud, dreaming about stars, taking a bath. Please tell us how this collection came about.

NG: The evolution of *Vacation Time* is an interesting story. Thomas came home one day when he was in the third grade and said, "Why don't you write a book of poems for us big kids?" As adults we are always looking for situations to teach our kids about what the world is like and what our jobs are like. I said to him, "Well, Thomas, I don't know anything about children. Mommy was always grown-up. How will I write that? Will you help me?" He said he'd be glad to help out, and I told him if he was going to help he'd have to be the editor. He said, "I can be the editor, Mommy." I told him I'd pay him a quarter a poem. He said, "Mommy, I think I should get a dollar a poem." Finally we negotiated a compromise of fifty cents per poem. I turned in the poems to Thomas as I finished with them. He would edit them for me with his comments and send them back. At that point, I hadn't really thought about it as being anything more than a performance. He started looking at the poems and finally got his red pencil. I began to see myself in my child. He'd check words. He'd ask, "Is this the right word? Is this the best word?" Finally we started to have a disagreement. It was like a true relationship between a writer and editor. I wrote a poem called "Covers," which is the next-to-last poem in *Vacation Time*. Thomas didn't like the poem at all. Originally, the first lines said, "Glass covers holes/ to keep the cold away," and he rejected the poem. He wrote "reject" on the top of the page and sent it back to me. I loved that poem. I said, "What's wrong with this poem?" He said, "Mommy, anybody can see if a glass covers it, it can't be a hole. Everybody knows that." I said, "Then I'll rework the poem." He said, "Well, I won't mind looking at it again." I started to hear myself again. So I worked on it and ended up with, "Glass covers windows/ to keep the cold away." He then accepted it, thank goodness.

The next poem I wrote for the collection was called "Winter." He looked at it and said what he didn't like in that poem was the last two lines: "Bears store fat, chipmunks gather nuts, and I collect books for the coming winter." He said it was a non-parallel image. He said the bear and the chipmunk had to hibernate. Both had to do the same thing. I told him that gathering books meant the same thing. He said that gathering books wasn't the same at all because one can always go to the library. He rejected it. I told him I was putting this poem in my next collection because I felt he was wrong about this one. I thought, "Well, I gave him a job and I have to let him work it out." So *Vacation Time* was the book that let my son see what I do for a living. It is very special to me for that reason. I never asked him to edit another book. He said he'd never ask me to edit a book of his. I said, "Fair enough!"

VC: Critics and reviewers have heaped high praise on most everything you have written; however, at times the critics were not so kind in their reviews of *Vacation Time*. How much do you pay attention to what critics and reviewers say? How much, if at all, should poets pay attention to criticism?

NG: I think over the years, essentially I've enjoyed a good relationship with critics and the press. But you can't let what they think you should write about influence you. You should write what you are interested in. I think that the thing they said about *Vacation Time* that was the most cruel to me was that it was "romantic." I didn't think it was romantic. I thought it was another view of childhood. I think this might have been said because I am black, and if you are black some people expect you to write a certain kind of writing—that you live in the inner city and that you should write about things being really awful. I don't look at childhood like that, and I didn't represent it that way in the book.

VC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

NG: I don't mean to sound clichéd, but just go ahead and read the poems to kids. I'm not saying you can't say something about the work, but you should let them enjoy it first. I volunteer a lot in our elementary schools here and in Cincinnati, and when I go in I read my poems. It really surprised me that kids would really listen. Kids like stories, so if you read to them or talk to them they will get what they want out of it. I really don't like things like music videos because you should be able to have your own image of the sound. Poetry lets children create their own images, especially when it is read aloud to them. All parents should make time to read to their kids. If you're not a night person, do it in the morning. Read a chapter during breakfast. That's one of those adult responsibilities. It introduces children to a wider world. Hopefully, through the reading, you're also teaching them some compassion so they don't grow up arrogant. You hope they grow up thinking they are fortunate that they have people to take care of them and that it is also their obligation to take care of somebody else.

VC: Related to this, what interaction do you strive for between reader and print? What type of response do you hope for from your readers?

NG: I hope the reader feels empathy while moving through the print. I also hope the print is friendly and what I've put there says, "I would like to be read." I know it says, "I would like to be understood." I'm not a muddled poet, but I will occasionally use larger words. I used some in *Vacation Time*. I used the word "incredulously" in the poem called "Vacation Time," and my house editor said kids wouldn't understand the word. I said, "Maybe not, but if they don't, they'll hear it and they'll learn it." So I really had to fight to use that particular word. That's also one of the things one of the reviewers said. He said kids wouldn't understand some of the words. I said, "Oh, sure they will. How are you going to teach them a new word unless you use it?" I read James Joyce when I was in the eighth grade. Do you think I understood his writing? I don't think so, at least not all of it. But nobody said to me, "You can't read Joyce!" So I read *Finnegans Wake*, and whatever I got out of it, I got. When I got older I read it again and learned still more.

VC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

NG: Spin a Soft Black Song will be out in an anniversary edition soon. I also have a new collection of essays that will be out this fall. I am also working on a collection of poetry that probably won't be completed until late 1994 or early 1995. I have an illustrated children's book coming out called *Knoxville, Tennessee* (1994) that will be published by Scholastic Press. It's a real treat for me to write for children. It's not something I approach lightly.

VC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

NG: I certainly hope that they will read. Not just my work, but everything.

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Patricia Hubbell

Patricia Hubbell has fond memories of a childhood that she says was spent "mostly outdoors." As the years passed, she felt herself forming a special bond with her surroundings. This bond was even reflected in her college studies; while majoring in English, Hubbell also pursued a minor in agriculture. Her early professional writings also show her love and respect for nature. While writing for a newspaper, she penned a column on horses and dogs. Later, she wrote articles about gardening and nature for the New York Times. *From this background, Hubbell has emerged as a writer especially adept at presenting for young readers the joys of an often rough-and-tumble world of the outdoors.*

Patricia Hubbell's poetry is characterized by a combination of vivid details and creative sound effects. Hubbell says, "I just like the sounds of things, like the chink of curb chains, the squeak of leather. [Sound is] really a necessary part of the description. It makes poetry come alive on the page."

Today, Patricia Hubbell lives in Easton, Connecticut.

Photo: Jeffrey Hornstein

VC: Please tell us about your childhood.

PH: I grew up in the small town of Easton, Connecticut. My father managed a large orchard as part of his job as watershed superintendent for the local water company. I spent most of my childhood doing outdoor things: walking, riding my horse, biking, fishing, skating. I also collected bird nests and snake skins and pressed leaves and flowers. When I was four, I was given a Shetland pony for my birthday. From that day to this I've ridden and owned horses. When I was eleven, my parents gave me a rowboat, and I spent as much time as I could rowing around the reservoir islands and watching muskrats, ducks, herons, turtles, and frogs. We had a playhouse in our backyard that I turned into a museum filled with my nature collection.

I was the middle of three children. I have an older sister, Jean, and a younger brother, Donald. We didn't live in a neighborhood in town; we lived out in the country, so there weren't many children to play with. I did have a best friend, though, who lived about a quarter of a mile away. I went to

Samuel Staples School in Easton, then to Bassick High School in Bridgeport, which was a long bus ride from our home. After graduation, I went to the University of Connecticut.

VC: What were your favorite subjects in school, and when did you first become interested in poetry?

PH: My favorite subjects from grammar school on were always reading, literature, nature study, biology, and agriculture. My worst was math. I have *always* loved to read. Receiving books for Christmas was one of the highlights of the year for me. From the time I was small, my parents and my grandmother read stories and poems to me. My grandmother loved poetry. I have distinct memories of her reading me the poems of Christina Rossetti, who is still one of my favorite poets. These are very fond memories for me.

VC: Do you think the reading of poetry by your parents and grandmother was one of the major sparks that led to your writing career?

PH: Yes, I think it was an important spark. I think that my having been read to a lot when I was little and the fact that I love to read myself are the two things that led me to be a writer. From the time I was very young, I loved to read poetry. The sound of the rolling, rhythmic words fascinated me as did the pictures the poems brought to mind and the thoughts they evoked. The poets I especially like include Christina Rossetti, William Blake, e. e. cummings, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Theodore Roethke, and about a hundred others! I just love poetry. All kinds, from all countries and all time periods. The fact that poets can say so much in so few words fascinated me, and it still does today.

VC: Tell us about your early writing experiences and your first piece published for young readers.

PH: I began to write poetry when I was in the third grade. I would write a poem and print it on cardboard and draw pictures around it. Sometimes I took the poems to school. But mostly I tucked them away in a drawer in my desk at home. When I was in the eighth grade, the school nurse showed some of my poems to a famous journalist, Ida Tarbell, who lived in our town. Miss Tarbell wrote me a letter saying she liked my poems. At the same time, she advised me to be careful not to "use weak words after strong ones." She also sent me instructions about how to submit poems to publishers. It really meant a lot to me for her to do that.

VC: Did you use her advice to get your first piece published?

PH: No, but it did make me think I could actually be a writer. If a famous writer like that took my poetry seriously, it meant something. I think what impressed me the most was her enclosing the instructions for how to submit manuscripts. She must have thought I was really going to do something as a writer. It's so sad I never did get to meet her. Miss Tarbell was very ill and she died before I was able to. That was a great disappointment. She was so kind.

Publishing came later. During college I really didn't write much poetry, but I started again soon after I graduated. The first poems I ever had published appeared in a weekly newspaper called the *Westport Town Crier.* I was working for the paper at the time. I met my husband while there. He was the news editor, and I was working in advertising. He got me switched to the news side and later talked me into starting a "Poems By Pat" column, which ran every week on the editorial page. These poems were not really poems for children, but some of them did appear afterward in my first book. Several of my friends in Westport who were also writers told me they liked the poems and suggested I publish them in other places or have a book made. That first gave me the idea that maybe I could do a book. Looking back on it, I can say I really got a lot of encouragement from them.

One day when I was looking through a stack of my poems, I came upon many I thought children might enjoy. I typed some of them up and sent them to a publisher. I got them back with a very encouraging letter but no sale. I next sent them to Atheneum and Jean Karl, who was the editor there. Jean liked them and asked if I had more poems that she could see. Luckily I did, so I sent her some more. The poems became my first book, *The Apple Vendor's Fair* (1963), which was published when I was thirty-four.

VC: You worked for a number of newspapers. How did these experiences influence your work as a poet?

PH: I wrote a column on horses and dogs for quite a few years for the *Bridgeport Post.* As I mentioned, when I first worked for a newspaper I sold advertising. When I went to the editorial side, I began to write news and feature stories. Later, I wrote the weekly column about horses and dogs, and articles about gardening and nature ran in the *New York Times* for a number of years. I also wrote a weekly nature editorial for the *New Haven Register.* Of all the newspaper writing, the nature pieces have the most in common with poetry. Many of them were really prose poems. That is, they were like poems set out in paragraphs, not in lines. They didn't have rhyme, but they were short and had color and sensory details and underlying emotions. Of course writing newspaper articles teaches you to take good notes, to be attentive to everything, to keep your writing concise, and to work to a deadline. In those ways it was helpful to poetry writing. Having a deadline might not seem important, but it teaches you to get it down on paper and not just let thoughts mull around forever in your head.

VC: While you were in college at the University of Connecticut, you majored in English and minored in agriculture. Why did you join two such seemingly different areas of study?

PH: That *was* unusual. The English majors thought I was an agriculture major, and the agriculture majors thought I was an English major. I entered college as an animal husbandry major because farming and the outdoors had always been my main interest. Although I loved most of the agriculture courses I was taking, I found I didn't love chemistry, physics, genetics, biochemistry, and all of the subjects required to graduate with an agriculture degree. Also, I began to wonder what I would actually do to earn a living after I graduated. In those days, very few women owned farms or became farm managers. It began to seem unrealistic. I thought if I studied English, perhaps I could make a living writing about the things that interested me, and that's just about what happened. As I studied English literature I continued to take agriculture classes in such areas as livestock judging, beef cattle production, management, horticulture, and others. I also took a few philosophy courses. When I graduated, my adviser said that she thought I had taken more varied courses than anyone she had ever heard of. I remember her looking over these courses and shaking her head and saying, "You certainly are taking advantage of this place!" It was fun and suited me perfectly. And I didn't have to take genetics and physics! With this background I was ready to start writing articles and poems about nature, the out-of-doors, animals, and farmers.

VC: Tell us about your own process of composing. How do you work as a writer?

PH: When I first started writing poems, I did them when the spirit moved me. I'd suddenly have a "poetry thought" come into my mind. Perhaps this would involve a line, a few words, or a rhythm, and I would sit down and write the poem. Basically, that's what I still do. However, now I find that if I sit at my desk every day, thoughts are more apt to come to me. Sometimes now I jog them into being by reading or even by typing nonsense to get a flow of words going. I think I've written more poetry by working at it than I would have if I'd just waited for inspiration to strike on its own. Sometimes, and this is only once in a while, if I want to write a poem and haven't any ideas, I'll look through the dictionary and choose two words at random and try to connect them in a poem. It's fun to do, and sometimes a pretty good poem results. At other times I'll choose a project and just try to carry it through. This may be something like writing a certain number of poems on a specific subject. It may involve a week of writing haiku. It may be doing only rhymed poems for a while—anything to keep going. Often I get poem ideas while I'm driving my car. If that happens, I park and get out my notebook and jot them down. Sometimes I write a whole poem while I'm sitting there. I also get ideas while I'm out for a walk or riding my horse. Unfortunately, if I'm on my horse, the idea has to wait until I get home before I can write it down While I ride I keep saying the idea over and over in my head to be sure I don't lose it. There's nothing more frustrating than losing a line or idea and never getting it back.

I usually keep a notebook and pencil with me. They are really all the equipment a poet needs, except for himself or herself. Sometimes I write in pencil, sometimes in pen, and sometimes on the typewriter. I don't have a computer, but maybe I should try one. Perhaps it would be just what I need to get some new ideas. Often I take notes like a reporter does and then write my poem using the information and the notes. That's how the poem "At Little League" from my book *Catch Me a Wind* (1968) came about. I went to a Little League baseball game and took lots of notes about what was going on. I sat in the bleachers and watched the crowd and what was happening all around me. I can still remember how a foul ball went out of the park and hit a car. Then I went home and wrote the poem. Last summer I went to about twenty agricultural fairs and took several notebooks full of notes. Then I came back and wrote poems from the notes and from what I'd remembered and thought about. In any event, poems always begin for me at the point where something—a word, phrase, line, rhythm, thought—catches my attention and becomes important.

I really have no special place to write. I can write anywhere. I have a desk that is a door on top of a couple of file cabinets. On it I have a typewriter and a little box that I keep manuscripts in. It usually has books and papers all over it. Sometimes I can't write at all. During those times I'll garden or do artwork until my head is ready to try poetry again.

VC: Do you have any habits or customs you follow as you write?

PH: Sometimes when I was writing little poems I used little pieces of paper, but I don't really do that anymore. If I'm going good I try to work for a couple of hours in the morning. I'll stick to that for a while, and then I kind of wander away from it. It also depends on the season of the year. If it's nice, I work in the garden in the morning. I'm not one of these people who wakes up at night and goes down and works. I've never tried that. I do keep a piece of paper and pencil near my bed in case I think of something. Only occasionally has it been anything worth remembering. I did write one poem that way. It was called "Conjugation."

VC: A Grass Green Gallop (1990) is a collection of poems mostly about different types of horses. Please tell us how this collection came about.

PH: For years I wanted to write poems about horses, but they never materialized. Then in 1987 I began to spend time with a retired veterinarian, Howard C. Raven, who had always been one of my favorite people. His wonderful stories about horses, their owners, and their problems suddenly jogged me to write, and poems began pouring out. I wrote the book in a little over a year. The book is dedicated to Dr. Raven. The poem "Doc" is about him.

Riding certainly has influenced my writing. I have often written about things I've seen while riding and the thoughts I've had while galloping or cantering through the woods and fields. Maybe too the motion of the horse has had something to do with my writing. Riding has a kind of rhythm, just the way poems do. Riding relaxes me. I guess when you relax your head is when you begin to have more ideas. It certainly is the case with me. Today I live in the woods, so my horse doesn't even have a pasture. She has a rocky Connecticut paddock, which is not very ideal. Her name is Magic Spell, but we call her Maggie.

VC: A hallmark of your poetry, and one seen vividly in *A Grass Green Gallop,* is precise, detailed description. For example, in "Doc" we learn that the horse is "17.1 hands high." In "The Family Horse" the horse is "long-backed, high-hipped." In "At the Horse Show" the horse has a "Roman nose." All are very specific.

PH: That is just the way I write. Poetry is such a concrete art. Specific details help bring the poem to life. I've always been interested in the scientific descriptions of things, the names of parts, and the way things work. Perhaps that has had something to do with it. In gardening articles, detailed descriptions are certainly important. Also, I always took a lot of biology courses in school. I imagine that too has had something to do with my use of detail, especially when it comes to living things.

VC: Another hallmark of your poetry is your use of sound in the poems. These sounds help make each poem come alive, make each exciting. These sounds also form central images that young readers can easily understand.

PH: Sounds are among the sensory details that make poems live. Often we tend to think mainly of visual images, but the feel, sound, smell, taste, and the way in which something moves are all important, too. I just like the sounds of things, like the chink of curb chains, the squeak of leather. It's really a necessary part of the description. It makes poetry come alive on the page.

VC: Another characteristic of your poetry is that it is very uplifting, very positive, very much heartwarming.

PH: If those feelings and tones have come across, I'm glad. In each poem you take a certain stance toward the subject, and I guess my general stance is a happy one. Poetry should be fun, even when it's serious.

VC: You also make use of creative word arrangement and spacing in your poems. What is your philosophy related to these areas?

PH: I enjoy the shapes of poems on the page. I especially enjoy arranging letters and words to reflect the poem's meaning. As I write, the poem begins to take a shape. I don't usually decide ahead of time what shape to give it. Some poems demand a traditional formal arrangement of lines, and others seem to want to go in all directions. I'm a painter, and I also enjoy making mobiles, masks, weavings, and baskets, so shape interests me greatly. I spend lots of time shaping my garden beds, especially the arranging of plants. These things all seem related to poetry. They all have to do with shape, balance, rhythm, and color. When I'm writing a poem, I sometimes spend a great deal of time typing and retyping until the spacing and line arrangement feels right. Of course, the spacing also influences the way a poem is read and the way it comes across to the reader. A poem about fireflies would have to have a light, airy, flyaway feeling. One about a workhorse would be heavy and stolid, and I try to reflect this not only in word choice but in the look of the poem on the page. I work it over and over until it feels right.

VC: How would you like to see your poetry introduced to young readers?

PH: I think the only way to introduce any poetry is to read lots of it. Have plenty of books to encourage the reading. Have the books available as part of everyday life. I don't really believe in making poetry any harder than it is by asking too many impossible questions about it. Just read it and enjoy it. Sometimes I see questions about my poems in books, and I'm so glad I don't have to answer them. I'm not sure I *could* answer them. As far as a response on the part of readers of my poetry, I guess I hope they find pleasure and delight and find everything interesting. Also, in something like *A Grass Green Gallop,* I hope readers will see that these things about horses are also true about people as well.

VC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

PH: I hope to keep on writing as long as I can. I'm always working on poems, and after a while I group some of them into possible books. Also, I'm working on a few thematic collections. I just finished a group of poems about country fairs. I wrote the poems on certain subjects the way I did for *A Grass Green Gallop.* I am also trying some prose in picture books for young children. I have much written, and I hope it all gets published! I keep sending manuscripts out. It can be very, very slow. Even after acceptance, if it's an illustrated book, finishing the illustrations can take what seems like forever. Most people don't know it, but there is usually at least a year and a half between acceptance and publication. And don't forget there is often a year between submitting something and acceptance. One really must be willing to persevere.

VC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

PH: To love life and each other and all the diversity in the world. Respect everybody and try for joy in life.

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Victor Martinez

Victor Martinez grew up in a family of twelve children. It isn't surprising, then, that one will find the importance of family at the heart and soul of his poetry. His poems are populated by grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, and a variety of cousins. Through these characters, Martinez presents a world in which love and respect for others are paramount. However, family relationships are not the only ones explored in his poetry. For Martinez, the world is a mosaic of relationships: "Everything we do has a meaning and is related to something else." He hopes that readers of his work will pause to ponder the significance of and interconnectedness of common, everyday events—events too often taken for granted.

Martinez's poetry is also characterized by powerful description born of the many occupations he has held in life: He has worked as a truck driver, field worker, metal grinder, teacher, firefighter, and clerk. From these many perspectives has grown a voice rich in metaphorical language, through which Martinez presents for his readers new ways of looking at the world.

Today, Victor Martinez lives with his wife in San Francisco's Mission District.

JC: Please tell us about your childhood.

VM: I grew up in the San Joaquin Valley in Fresno, California. I was a very boisterous child. My mother called me a "yeller" because I was always yelling about something or talking back to her. Also, I was always getting into things, and it seemed like I was constantly in trouble because of something like staying out too late at night or not doing my chores.

I came from a huge family of twelve children, seven boys and five girls. There would have been fifteen, but three of the children did not live past infancy. Family became very important to me early on, because we all lived either with each other or right next to each other. My grandfather owned two houses right next door to his home, and these were occupied by aunts, uncles, cousins, and even my great-grandparents. My family practically made up its own community, and I really enjoyed having this extended family around me. Everyone got along well. In addition to these relatives, I had close to a hundred cousins and second-cousins who lived in or near Fresno. It seemed like no matter where I went, I saw family.

JC: What were your hobbies when you were a youngster?

VM: I was a collector. My favorite hobby involved collecting insects, which I learned from my older brother. I'd capture them and pin them to boards until I had nice displays of different types. I mention this hobby in my poetry quite often. I also enjoyed caring for animals. I had creatures like salamanders and bullfrogs that I used to keep in my room, much to my mother's horror. I also liked collecting rocks and shells of all types. There were so many of us in the family I never had my own room. As a result, when the room I was in got filled up, I had to throw everything out and start all over again. That collecting habit is still with me today, only it's taken on different forms, like collecting books of poetry, for example.

JC: What subjects did you most enjoy in school?

VM: Reading and writing were always my favorite subjects in school. I even enjoyed history, biology, and geography because these subjects had great textbooks that I could sit and read by the hour. But a subject like math . . . I did well in math at first, but I lost interest because there wasn't anything to read in the book. And if I couldn't get lost in the reading, a subject quickly bored me.

JC: What would you say was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

VM: When I was a kid, as I read stories, I would dream about someday becoming a writer and telling my own stories. I thought that would be the best thing a person could do. However, that dream got lost for a time when I got to high school. A famous local writer, William Saroyan, when asked what one should do to become a famous writer like him, said, "Number one, you've got to learn how to type." I couldn't type a lick at that time, so I signed up right away for the typing class. I really believed him and thought I was finally on my way to becoming a writer. I got to forty-five words per minute, and I'm afraid I'm still at that rate today, although I would like to type as fast as I think because I lose thoughts sometimes. However, it gets me there. I discovered typing was a useful skill to know, but all that practice was keeping me from writing a lot. It does seem ironic that learning to type kept me from my writing, but sometimes to do things, you have to prepare beforehand.

After I learned to type, three things got me back on track as a writer. The first was writing "absence notes" for friends of mine. These were notes like, "Carlos couldn't be in school yesterday because he fell and twisted his leg." Some of the excuses got pretty wild. I was really good at writing these notes, so good, in fact, that I never got caught. This skill also made me very popular with the types of students who missed school a lot. You know, the tough, rebellious guys and raucous girls. Some of the stories I write now are about those friends.

The second event took place in my English class. For some assignment I wrote a cowboy story that was right out of the Old West. My teacher was very impressed with it and read it to the class. When she finished, the whole class said, "Did you write that?" I said I had. They said, "No, you didn't. You must have stolen that from some book." Everybody started fighting over whether or not I had really written the story. Nobody could believe I could write like that. It was at that time I discovered what type of effect writing could have on people, and I became more excited than ever about it.

The third major event took place when I went to college. While at college I used to hang around with two of my older brother's friends. They were the only two Chicanos I knew who were majoring in English. They were always talking about papers they were writing, books they were reading, or writing workshops they were attending. Their enthusiasm rubbed off on me, and I decided to take a poetry class. Phillip Levine was the teacher. On the first day of class he said to us, "There are thirty people enrolled in this class. Within a month twenty of you will be gone because I'm going to work you to death." I have always loved a challenge, so his comments were just what I needed. He used to take the most interesting poems and read them to the class so all could analyze them. He chose the very first poem I wrote in that class to share with everybody. When he was finished talking about my poem, he said, "This is a really good poem!" I'll never forget that moment. I was floating on top of the world.

JC: Did you take other creative writing courses while in college?

VM: I took another poetry class right away, but I didn't have the same sort of experience in this one. However, I did learn one of the most important lessons a writer can learn. The teacher looked at the first poem I wrote for this class and said, "This is just terrible." After hearing that, I was crushed and didn't turn in anything for eight weeks. Instead, I spent that whole time rewriting that first poem. Finally, after dozens of rewrites, I handed it back in, and the teacher said, "This is more like it." The poem was about my grandmother, and I hadn't really taken the time to show what she was like in the first version. In the second version

I thought about her more. I learned a valuable lesson from all of this: If you are going to write a poem that is any good, you must be willing to invest the time to work on it and the thoughts that you have on the subject. After discovering that, I really got into writing. I loved the feedback I would get in class. Most of the time the teacher and the other students liked my poems, but sometimes they didn't, and that was okay. At this time I thought, "This is what I'd really like to do with my life."

JC: Who were the poets you studied as you were developing as a poet?

VM: In college I remember mostly studying classic American writers like Emerson, Whitman, Poe, and Hawthorne. I loved their writing styles and read them over and over again. Today my favorite poet is Cesar Vallejo. I have read everything he has written. I also study the work of the Spanish poet Blas de Otero. Among American contemporary poets, I admire the poetry of Phillip Levine, Juan Felipe, Hererra, Gary Soto, John Ashbery, and Sharon Olds. Edna O'Brien is my favorite fiction writer, and James Baldwin is my favorite nonfiction writer.

JC: What was your first poem to be published, and where was it published?

VM: When I was younger I really didn't want to publish my poetry. I was too self-conscious. I wasn't at all like my friend Gary Soto, whom I admired and who was involved in all aspects of the literary scene in Fresno. I just liked the fact that I could show poems to people and they'd like them. Later, when I went to Stanford University, some of my friends in the Spanish department were putting together a magazine called *Vortice*. They asked me for a poem, and I submitted one called "A Walk to Town." They accepted it, and that became my first published poem. Surprisingly, today people still come up to me and say they saw that poem and liked it very much. That was so many years ago!

It wasn't long after this that I also learned one of the economic realities of writing: Most writers don't get rich or famous through their writings. I submitted my poem called "National Geographic" to the magazine *ZYZZYVA*. I was excited when they decided to publish it, but I was even more excited when I found out they were actually going to pay me fifty dollars for it. I was thrilled to get a check, but at the same time I could see a person would have to write all the time and one heck of a lot of poems to make any sort of living from writing. You have to really *want* to write poetry to be a poet. If you just want fame or money—forget it!

JC: Tell us about your process of composing.

VM: For the past five years I have been trying to keep a regular schedule. I usually get up and write from eight to eleven or nine to twelve. I like to write in three-hour blocks. Then in the afternoon I write from one to four, sometimes five, if I'm hot. Once I get started on a project, I am pretty strict about keeping to this schedule. Also, when I'm working on something like an essay, I'll keep working on that essay until it is finished and won't begin anything else. I just finished writing a novel and couldn't write anything else while I was into that.

JC: Do you have any habits, customs, or superstitions you observe as you write?

VM: One superstition I have involves the pens and pencils I use to write poems. If I'm out for a walk and find a pen or pencil on the street, I pick it up, bring it home, and write with it. I wrote "National Geographic" and "Evicted from the Planet" (from *Caring for a House,* 1992) with a plastic pen I found that had been crushed in the street. When I picked it up, I imagined it had belonged to a homeless person. I always try to imagine who owned it, how they lost it, and what is going on for them in life. It may sound strange, but I really feel I get something from these pens and pencils. To me, it is almost as if through these pens I get to see into another person's soul.

JC: Where do you prefer to do your writing?

VM: I like writing at home. Here in San Francisco there are cafés just about every block, and you'll see writers in practically every single one of them. However, in my opinion these aren't the best places to work. I usually see these writers just sitting there and drinking coffee. Sometimes I'll get lazy and wander down to one of these cafés, but it seems like all I ever end up doing is shooting the breeze. I very seldom get any work done there. And you can't believe how noisy these places are. On the opposite end, I also can't write in libraries because they are too quiet. In libraries there are so many books they fill me with a sense of dread. The books overpower and overwhelm me.

JC: In terms of specific features of your poetry, there are three recurring images that dominate the lines. The first is that of birds. Birds are everywhere in your poetry. At times the reader will see and feel the freedom of the birds; at other times, through these images the reader will sense a feeling of change in everyday life.

VM: My use of birds goes back to when I worked for the Forest Service. Whenever we went somewhere, we'd go by helicopter. When you take off in a small helicopter, like a B1 or a B2, it doesn't feel like you are taking off in a machine. It seems like all of a sudden the earth just slides away from or peels away from you. It is such a weird sensation. When you get up in the air, you can see everything objectively. When you see the forests, lakes, and cities from up in the air, you really see for the first time what the landscape looks like. And it was sure a different view from anything I had ever seen while on the ground. While up in the helicopter I kept thinking I was seeing and experiencing the world the way a bird would. It also dawned on me that as I went up, the only living things I saw were birds. To me, they hold the horizon. Every once in a while I'd see a group of birds flying by, and it would seem like they were all weaving the horizon together. That is why in the poem "Keeping Faith" (from *Caring for a House*) I wrote that people need to be more like birds, "holding up/the horizon." The more I flew in the helicopter, the more I grew to admire and respect birds. It is this admiration that is coming through in my poetry.

JC: Another recurring image in your poetry is of a cancer or tumor ("National Geographic," "The Seed Must Kill," "Mistakes," all from *Caring for a House*). Why this particular image?

VM: This image appears so often because it hits very close to home. Many people in my family have died from cancer; it seems to run in my father's side of the family. Also, and this too goes back to my days with the Forest Service, I view cities as tumors. That is, if you go up in a helicopter or plane and scan the landscape, you'll see all these beautiful forests or sections of wonderfully flat land. Then, you come to the cities. The cities look ugly and look like they are consuming and swallowing all around them. So, if you look down from the sky, the cities *are* like tumors. I use this metaphor quite often because it represents the way I feel about our relationship to the earth.

JC: The other recurring image is of clouds. However, the clouds appear in sharp contrast from poem to poem: the harsh "cataract clouds" in "Alphabet" to the soft "music of clouds" in "There Is No More" (both from *Caring for a House*). These images serve to establish the tone of the poem.

VM: My grandfather used to say, "If you look inside clouds, you can see everything." He also said that if you look at clouds, you can sort out your life because in the act of looking at them all sorts of things pop into your head. I believe that. If you want to reflect on something, it's better to look up at the sky than it is to look down at the ground. When you look at the sky you can objectify what you are experiencing on the ground. Ninety percent of the people reflect as they walk around and look at the sidewalk. They really should be looking up at the clouds and dreaming of the possibilities in life. We should allow ourselves mental driftings. I suggest that everybody take some time to look up at the clouds.

JC: A hallmark of your poetry is that it examines the significance of little things in life and the interconnectedness of events. All events appear as integral parts of the same whole.

VM: When I look at "reality," I don't see fragmentation and chaos; I see understanding and cohesion. Everything we do has a meaning and is related to something else. When we drink a glass of water, for example, we don't really know how much energy was taken out of the fabric of the earth to get that water or to make that glass. But, the two events are related, even though we don't often think of such relationships. I try in my poetry to present these relationships so that readers will then think and talk about them.

JC: A common theme in your poetry is the fact that we are of this earth for a moment, that the passage of time is swift and knife-like.

VM: When I was growing up, I knew my great-grandparents. They told me stories about when they were young, but I only knew them as older people who were about at the end of their lives. When my great-grandmother died, everyone said she lived a full life. However, *I* wasn't there when she was living this full life. All I knew were the fleeting stories she told me. And when she shared these stories with me, the time we spent together was actually very short. This time together was just a sliver of my existence, and of hers. As I grew older I started thinking that I was getting more and more like my great-grandparents. What I thought had been a very long life for me up to that point started to seem very short. I think all people eventually feel this way. I have thought about this a lot, and this theme shows up frequently in my poetry. It is a way for me to deal with mortality.

JC: Related to this, family forms the heart and soul of your work. In your poetry we find grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, and sisters. The events of their lives, their dreams and heartaches, all form the universe you create in your lines.

VM: There is no doubt that this is because I had such an extended family when I was a child. Family was, and still is, everything to me. I still have what seems like zillions of relatives all over the place. I don't have any children of my own yet to add to the family census, but that's okay because most of the time I still feel like a child myself. My wife always says to me, "In your case, you'll never grow up. You'll always be young because you are always thinking about when you were a kid." I guess I am always thinking about those memories, and the memories are primarily about my family and all we used to do together. This is another reason why family shows up so often in my poetry; family and human relationships are central to all that I do as a writer.

JC: Powerful description is another characteristic of your poetry, brought forth through striking, metaphorical language. Examples include the "bullying commands of the clock" in "The Taxidermy Shop," the "odor of disturbed spices" in "One Day More, Another Day Less," and the "sludge of numbers" in "After Work" (all from *Caring for a House*). Through this metaphorical language, the descriptions are stunning, but not confining. They leave room for the reader to add his or her own perception or experience to the lines.

VM: I have heard the language used this way all of my life. When I talk to my mother, father, or grandparents, they all talk in metaphor. When they talk, they use objects or amazing comparisons to express what they are trying to say. I know I have learned from listening to them, and I'm sure this is why my imagery and characterizations are as detailed as they have become. If I'm going to describe something, I try to put something physical in the description. I also like to throw two words together that you wouldn't normally see in the same context. I smash them together, like physicists smash atoms, to see what comes out. All of this I got from listening to my relatives.

At the same time, the metaphorical language comes from a lot of hard work. If you work with the language, you try to break through common language constructions. Sometimes I'll write two or three lines and won't have any idea what they mean or where they are going. Usually, I'll look at these lines over and over and come back to them a few days later. Hopefully, I will see a connection and say, "Yeah, that is what I was really trying to say, but I need to do something with the way those words or lines are constructed."

At still other times, many of the images I write down are raw and undeveloped at first. They aren't anything like what finally appears in the poem. Take the "bullying commands of the clock" (in "The Taxidermy Shop"), for example. I first wrote it as just the "commands of the clock" because I thought of how time doesn't wait for anything; time commands all. That wasn't a bad image, but it wasn't until a few days later that I came up with the idea of adding the word "bullying" to complete the image and bring it to life. The constant challenge for the poet is to discover how words fit together, and how they fit together will change as the context of the larger poem surrounds and absorbs them. This is the beauty of poetry. In many ways writing poetry is playing with the language, and through this play the poet can experiment with really outlandish constructions. So, when you write poetry, you must be willing to take chances and risks with words. It is through taking risks that beautiful description is born.

JC: How would you like to see your poetry introduced to young adults?

VM: Before reading my poems, I would like my readers, especially my younger readers, to think about a few things. First, I'd like them to think about their own families and what these people mean to them. I want them to think about the fact that we are all getting older and will be gone someday, so before it is too late they should re-evaluate their feelings and ties with each member of the family. Second, readers who are sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen should try to imagine themselves being eighty-four. If they can do this, and do it honestly, they can open up another frame of reference which will be invaluable for them. It will lead to more understanding, trust, and respect among all generations. Finally, read with an open mind. Use your imagination to explore all the possibilities of the language.

JC: What suggestions do you have for young writers interested in writing poetry?

VM: You mean besides learning to type and looking for lost pens and pencils?

There is a common misconception that writers are supposed to try to experience everything in life before they start writing. I don't agree with this at all. I think that people should first try to figure out who they are and where they come from. When I first started writing, I thought that writers had to come up with big, outlandish stories. I finally realized that the best writing stays very much close to home. In your writing, stay close to the experiences you have had and write about what is most natural to you. These experiences will grow with time. Be patient.

JC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

VM: I just finished a novel called *Parrot in the Oven* (1995). It is about a fourteen-year-old boy growing up in the San Joaquin Valley. I also have a collection of poems just about ready to send off to a publisher. I have been fiddling with these for way too long. I keep changing a word here or a line there. I should just put them together and be done with them!

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

VM: I would encourage readers to get together to discuss not only my poems but all the poems they can get their hands on. Not everyone will agree upon what is taking place in a given poem. One poem will say one thing to one reader, and the same poem will say just the opposite to another. That is part of the beauty of poetry. Listen to what others have to say, and never be afraid to express your own feelings. Also, flesh out poetry you read by adding in your own mind your own experiences in life. Respect poetry and poets, no matter how crazy they may appear at times. Poets have always been known to bring the world out of crisis and to give it a little shock when it becomes too boring and mundane. Also, try writing poetry yourself. You'll discover that it is the ultimate freedom. You don't need any technology or privilege. Words from one human being to other human beings, that's all it is.

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Lucille Clifton

*Through her poetry, Lucille Clifton captures both the joys and tribulations of belonging to a family. Readers will encounter all from the birth of a sibling (*Everett Anderson's Nine Month Long*, 1978) to the death of a loved one (*Everett Anderson's Goodbye*, 1983). And for Clifton, the definition of family extends far beyond just the notion of "nuclear family"; she believes that family can be any "group of people who are committed to you and you are committed to them." As a result of this belief, Clifton creates in her writing a much larger family to which all children belong: the family of humanity, held together by love and respect.*

In terms of style, Lucille Clifton's poetry for the younger reader is characterized by short, tight lines empowered by rich imagery. Through this style, she brings to life young, inquisitive speakers who are very much aware of the events of the world around them. For a variety of reasons, ranging from the physical to the emotional, these speakers must at times be both resourceful and independent, characteristics that add universality to the lines.

Today, Lucille Clifton lives in Columbia, Maryland.

VC: Please tell us about your childhood.

LC: I was born in Depew, New York, which is just outside of Buffalo. I was the oldest of three children and was considered tall and gangly for my age. We moved to Buffalo when I was about five, and I grew up there. I remember Buffalo as a cold, snowy place.

I was a great reader as a child. The main thing about me was that I was always kind of quiet, and I was always reading. People used to say, "Go out and play. You've always got a book in your hands. Something's going to happen to that child!" I would read everything. If there were books especially for children, I didn't know about them particularly. So, I read all kinds of things, everything I could get my hands on. That is what I remember about most of my childhood.

When I was growing up, in the 1940s, we used to sit around the table and listen to the radio. Those were fun times for me. I remember when television sets first showed up and we went down and watched them through the store window. I wasn't part of the TV generation; I was before that. Radio was our entertainment. My mother also used to sing and tell stories all the time. I loved listening to grown-ups tell stories. I was somewhat of a loner as a child. However, I loved school. For elementary school I went to School #17 in Buffalo. Later I went to Fosdick Masten Park High School. I enjoyed school so much I would have gone on weekends if they had let me. I just loved it in general, especially reading. However, I was not fond of geography, as I remember. To this day I don't have much of a clue about where everything is. I also liked math. In high school I took as many math courses as I could. I really liked all kinds of things. I have never been a person who was exclusive in what I wanted to learn. I loved learning; I still do.

VC: What was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

LC: I never knew I could be a writer. I never saw anybody who looked like me who was a writer. I certainly never saw any work by anybody who looked like me. But I always wrote poems and stories. My mother used to recite poetry to us. It was usually traditional iambic pentameter verse. Neither of my parents graduated from elementary school, but they were both great readers. Therefore, we always had a house full of books, and some of these were poetry books. One of my favorite memories of childhood was when I discovered I could get a library card. I was amazed I could go in there and the books were free and I could take them home. It was great!

When I wasn't reading, I was writing. I always wrote things and nobody told me I couldn't. Of course, writing and publishing are two different things. I didn't choose writing as a career path; I was just somebody who wrote. Nobody would have told me I could choose writing as a career. Certainly not in the 1950s in Buffalo, New York. So when people asked me what I wanted to be, I couldn't figure it out exactly. What I knew about myself was that I wrote poems. That was a very natural thing for me. I felt that it was natural to write poems because of the fact I loved language, was interested in the language, and was a great reader.

VC: After you graduated from high school, what did you plan to study as you entered college?

LC: I got two scholarship offers, one to Howard University and the other to Fredonia State Teachers College. Fortunately, when I left Howard University, Fredonia still let me come there. I was a drama major in college. I don't even know if my parents knew that because the only thing a person my age and complexion could be at that time, or so we were led to believe, was a teacher or a nurse, and I didn't want to be either one of those things. I loved the theater. I was still writing poems in college, but I wanted to be an actress. It didn't occur to me to say that I wanted to be a poet.

While in college I met some wonderful people. It was also the first time I met black people who were very much into things like the theater and art and who were seriously committed to those areas. I was at Howard University when Sterling Brown taught there. He was a great teacher. There were many wonderful poets and writers there, like Owen Dodson and Joe Walker. Joe Walker, a classmate of mine, wrote the play *The River Niger.* These writers weren't mentors; rather, we were all kids together trying to create. We were all people who joined together in a commitment to writing.

VC: Who or what would you say influenced you most as you developed as a writer?

LC: I haven't really been influenced by other writers. I think the most important influence on me as a writer has been oral language. I love hearing stories. I especially remember going to church as a child and hearing biblical stories and language spoken well. I have never taken creative writing or other writing courses. I think other major influences upon me have been just general life experiences and the fact that I pay a lot of attention to things going on around me. I have a good ear for oral speech and a good feeling for the possibilities of language. Words are more than their definitions. I never forget that. I guess the first poet I read seriously was Edna St. Vincent Millay. I also loved the novels of Thomas Wolfe. I suppose those were voices I wrote through to get to my own voice. I didn't study writing, so I don't have a kind of linear writing development. I wasn't taught to write; I just learned to write.

VC: What was your first published piece for young readers?

LC: I had a poem published in the University of Buffalo literary magazine when I was in my teens. Then, and I haven't thought about this in years, I next had a little story published in *Highlights for Children.* The story was called "Mae Baby." I really enjoyed writing that story. I have not been a person who does a lot of sending out of manuscripts. Especially when I was younger I didn't because the idea of being a poet wasn't an idea that seemed realistic. I have always been more interested in the writing than the publishing side. Even today I get in magazines because somebody calls and asks me for a poem. I just don't tend to send writings to magazines like many people do.

VC: How do you work as a writer? Any habits, customs, observances?

LC: First of all, I never did like writing longhand, so I used to write on a typewriter all the time. Thankfully, now I have a word processor. It is not a computer; it's a typewriter with a memory. I compose in my head up to a certain point, then sit somewhere to write it down. I can't write on any page that has mistakes on it. This can be a problem because I don't type very well. I use only two fingers on each hand. So if I get to the last line and make a mistake, I rip the page out of the typewriter and start all over again. I really do that. When I'm writing, I write all the time. I take very few breaks. Also, if I start writing on one typewriter, I can't switch to another one. I have to continue it on the same typewriter. If I go away from home, I work on it internally until I can get back to the typewriter. For instance, right now school is out, but I have to go to my office to write because I started the poems I'm presently writing on the typewriter in my office.

Also, I always keep a good amount of information in my head. I have been able to do that for years. I was the mother of six little children. My baby is now twenty-seven. They were only six and a half years apart in age, from the oldest to the youngest. So, when I was writing and taking care of all six at once, I had to be able to keep things in my head. I didn't always have time to go type because of all the care the children required. I think writers develop the process they can use; it is born from necessity. It certainly was for me.

When I write, I also like to have music playing. I like all kinds of music, absolutely everything from Bach to Aretha Franklin. I suppose I have music playing out of habit. When the children were little there was *always* some noise. If they were quiet, I had to go check on them. Remember, I had four in diapers at the same time. So when it was quiet I knew something was going on. I got so used to the noise that now I can't write when it is quiet.

VC: Generations: A Memoir (1976) is a detailed account of your own family history. This is valuable reading for all interested in your work as a poet because the material found in it puts many of your poems dealing with family heritage and ancestry in context. Please tell us the genesis of this book.

LC: Putting *Generations* together was an interesting and joyful experience for me. When I was younger I remember my father always used to say, "You're not the first Lucille, you know." He'd then tell all kinds of stories about the family and our history. I think that I always wanted to write this story, but it took me a long time to figure out how to do it. I wondered, "Where do I check things? What kind of records are there?" There aren't many records related to African American people, especially for those generations. It took me a long time to do the research for the stories and figure out how to put them to paper. I give a lot of credit to my editor at Random House. The editor for *Generations* was Toni Morrison. Toni, in addition to being a wonderful writer, is a fine editor. We had a very special and interesting working relationship. As a writer, her inclination seems to be to put things in the writing, and mine is to take things out. However, we got along well. The fact that she could edit me says something pretty good about her.

I began to write down the stories with her encouragement. I found that I could write them using my father's voice. For some of my father's stories, I felt fact didn't matter so much. What mattered was the stories. I just found out the Aunt Lucille in that book died a few months ago. One of the things I feel very sad about is that I'm the last Lucille in the family. None of my children would name their children after me.

VC: I understand that you placed ads in newspapers in order to gather some of the genealogical information.

LC: After placing the ads, I received a call and a note from a woman who was a descendant of the original slave-owning family and who was a journalist. She was also very interested in genealogy. She had never married and was the last in her family. Though she didn't call again, she did send a copy of her family history that she had written. That was a great help to me. That information plus the stories my father had told me really got me excited about the project.

VC: Your Everett Anderson books are considered contemporary classics of children's literature. In these books we find a young, inquisitive speaker, one who is very much aware of his surroundings and his relationship to these surroundings. This awareness, and the special way it is expressed, adds a universality to the lines.

LC: I find it interesting that people say these books are poetry. I don't see them as poetry. They are really close to poetry, but I think they should be called very good verse instead. I think *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* is a pretty good book because it evokes an emotion. I tried to evoke emotions in all the books, and I think that is what makes them seem universal. My first priority in writing these books was to write about a poor child in the projects. I wanted to write so that children who are poor would see that they were only poor in things and not actually poor in spirit. That doesn't just apply to African American children; it applies to all children. The fact that he is African American doesn't get in the way of children who read the books. It sometimes gets in the way of adults, but it doesn't get in the way of children. I get letters from children all the time who are primarily not African American who relate to the characters in the books. The books are for *all* readers.

VC: Another characteristic of the Everett Anderson books is that the speaker is a very independent soul, one who is at times alone or simply feels alone. Like Everett Anderson, many children today must be independent because of various family circumstances.

LC: The fact is, children sometimes are alone. They need to know it's okay; to feel lonely at times is a normal human condition. I'm not one who believes that children have to see rosy things all the time, because the real world is not like that. When I'm talking to teacher groups I sometimes remind them that they have students at their schools, and who sit in their classrooms, who every single day bear something they couldn't bear. That is still true. In the Everett Anderson books he gets over things. I hope children notice that. A child once asked me, "Why do bad things happen to the kids in your books?" I said, "Well, bad things happen, but problems usually get worked out."

VC: Another hallmark of your poetry, and a common thread running through all your writings, is the importance of family, and these families are held together by love and respect.

LC: Family is very important to me. But this family is also family with a broad definition. The nuclear family thing has been a myth for years. I wanted to assure people that if there weren't two blood parents and two kids in each home that you could still have a family. Your family might consist of people who are around you who are not related to you by blood. I wanted them to see that a family can just be a group of people who are committed to you and you are committed to them. What holds any type of family together is love and respect. I hope this also comes across in the books.

VC: In terms of style, your poetry is characterized by short, tight lines loaded with rich imagery. Your readers feel, smell, taste, and hear elements of the speaker's life. These images create a vivid world easy for young readers to enter.

LC: I purposely wish to be clear in writing. Absolutely every word I use is there because it has to be there. I always say my life is fairly casual, but my work is not. This is especially true in poetry, where everything matters. The particular language I use is used on purpose. Where possible, I like every word to stand for many possibilities. Many young readers think that a word is only its definition. Of course, that is simply not true. When I use a word I think of its history, its music, its resonance—everything. I think about all of that when I'm trying to put a poem together so that everybody can find something in the poem. Different readers will read each piece on different levels. The person who doesn't read much poetry can get something from the poem, and people who read poetry all the time can hopefully get something also. I feel the same way about line arrangement and all other aspects of crafting a poem. Everything has to fit.

VC: Your collections of poetry for older readers have become very popular with the young adult audience. These collections, like *Good Times* (1969), *Good News about the Earth: New Poems* (1972), *two-headed woman* (1980), and *Next: New Poems* (1987), are all very different from the Everett Anderson books and other pieces you have done for younger readers. In these collections, your poems cover subjects ranging from a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ("The meeting after the savior gone 4/4/68" from *Good Times*), to the spiritual ("Prayer" from *Good News about the Earth*). How would you like to see these collections introduced to young adult readers?

LC: We shouldn't underestimate young people and think they can't handle things. They are human beings, and I always say I haven't written anything that isn't about humans. I don't see any problems with having young adults read these poems. In some way they will be able to relate to them, even though I wrote them for older readers. They may not understand them completely, but that is okay for now. I also think it is a mistake to think only African Americans can relate to poems written by African Americans. When I went to school I read Walt Whitman and Edna St. Vincent Millay. I thought both were just wonderful. Maybe I didn't understand everything they wrote, but I always tell my students that adults don't always understand everything they read. We should be learning all the time. And, we shouldn't forget that our education isn't finished when we graduate from school. That event is usually just the beginning.

VC: Related to this, what interaction do you strive for between reader and print?

LC: I hope they will enter a poem with me. I hope we can meet at the place where we are both human, and they can take something positive away from the work. I hope they can say, "Yes, I understand that," or, "I have seen that." I hope for a common experience.

VC: Regarding your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

LC: I am always writing. I have two children's books that are coming out sometime soon that are closer to poems. I'm also writing more adult poems. I'm always going to be doing what I do.

VC: What suggestions do you have for young writers interested in writing poetry?

LC: Be true to yourself. Write out of your life, not what's fashionable or what you think others want to hear. Write what you want to say. Someone once said, "If you can stop writing, do. If you can't, then keep doing it." Think about that for a minute. Also remember that there is no one way for a writer to look or no one place for a writer to come from. An American contemporary writer comes from all that is America. Remember that the voices of America are many different notes all going into the same song. Remember that you are special.

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Maxine Kumin

Through the years, Maxine Kumin has written poetry for readers of all ages. No One Writes a Letter to the Snail *(1962), a collection that celebrates the world of the young child, is a classic of children's literature.* Up Country: Poems of New England *(1972), a collection written for older, more mature readers, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. All her poems, regardless of audience, are held together through a celebration of the ordinary, commonplace events of everyday life, especially as they relate to country living. These events are captured in a style characterized by word economy and tightly focused descriptions. One word that Kumin uses to describe her poetry built through this style is "muscular."*

At the same time, readers have come to expect another hallmark of Kumin's writing: Animals are present in just about all she writes. Through observation of and interaction with these animals, readers are better able to understand the more "human" aspects of our world.

Kumin also has strong beliefs related to sharing poetry with young readers. Above all, she believes that poetry first should be made enjoyable and celebrated—not something to be explicated and studied.

Today, Maxine Kumin lives in Warner, New Hampshire.

Photo: William F. Bolton

VC: Please tell us about your childhood and development as a writer.

MK: I grew up in Germantown in suburban Philadelphia, and I think, looking back on it, that I had a lot of leeway as a child. I could pedal my bike about ten blocks to the Lovett Memorial Library, which I remember as a great stone edifice with imposing librarians who would only let me carry out six books at a time. But I could read these and return them the next day, if I liked. Or, with a cousin, I could pedal a mile or so into the Wissahickon Park and spend all day observing pollywogs in one pond or another. From the time I was ten or eleven, I spent two months every summer at the same small camp in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. We took lots of canoe and other kinds of trips into what felt like wilderness. My love of the outdoors was nurtured by these summers, and I also got to be quite a good swimmer. All through junior high and high school, it was the prospect of going back to my beloved camp that got me through the winters.

Two women teachers I had in high school were probably the major literary influences on my life and times. One was an English teacher, the other a Latin teacher who also served as adviser to the school paper; this was a program in which you kept the same teacher for the same subject for all four years, eighth through twelfth grades. My wonderful English teacher taught me and many others like me to read and appreciate serious poetry and to understand its formal aspects, which I think of as the game, or play, aspects of writing—writing in rhyme and meter, and so on. My Latin teacher cultivated in all of us the love of and admiration for language in general. We got a sense of tidiness and order from studying Latin, which is a reasonable language of roots to which you add prefixes and suffixes. That's another kind of game, isn't it? By the time I entered college I had acquired a pretty firm grounding, thanks to these two dedicated women.

VC: Who were and are the writers who have influenced you most as you have developed as a writer? Who were your poetic heroes and heroines?

MK: I find at this point in my life I'm still very much interested in what women are writing. When I was very young my literary heroine was Louisa May Alcott. An aunt of mine had given me a complete set of Louisa May Alcott's novels when I was a child. I loved all of them from *Eight Cousins* to *Rose in Bloom*. I also read a good many British writers, simply because they were made available to me. I recall reading *The Bastable Children*, by E. Nesbit—another woman—a book children are still reading today. I also read a wonderful book by another British woman, Primrose Cumming, called *Silver Snaffles*. I re-experienced this book when I discovered it in the stacks while I was at the Library of Congress, and I enjoyed it then just as much as I had when I was younger. The poetic heroes and heroines are kind of hard to pinpoint. There really weren't any women poets that I could name as mentors, simply because when I was learning my craft it was almost entirely a male-dominated field. I would further say that I had no women teachers, section leaders, or instructors when I was in college. They were all men. I'm certainly glad that has changed today.

VC: Tell us about your early writing experiences.

MK: I scribbled a lot throughout my childhood and adolescence. I was on the high school yearbook editorial board and wrote for the high school paper, things I have fond memories of. Then I didn't write for some years. I married young and had a family right away. At that time I did do a lot of commercial writing, ghostwriting for a group of doctors. I wrote medical articles for them, ranging from revising the tangled prose of an Austrian psychiatrist to composing factual pieces about burn treatments for a busy surgeon. The first thing I wrote for young readers was *Sebastian and the Dragon*, which was published by Putnam in 1960. I wrote that specifically for our third child and first son, who was then three. He was born in 1953, and I started writing the book in 1956, but it takes a long time between composing and actually getting published. I wrote that as a corrective to what I thought was a terrible book my son insisted on hearing night after night. *Sebastian* was designed for a small boy who was the youngest in the family.

Almost immediately after that, Putnam asked me to write a series of books based on the seasons. They wanted these to employ a limited vocabulary. These were called "See and Read" books. Very quickly I wrote *Spring Things*, *A Summer Story*, *Follow the Fall*, and *A Winter Friend*, all published in 1961. Because they were confined to a limited vocabulary, I could have just ten or fifteen outside words per book that weren't on their list. Just to make it more interesting and challenging to do, I wrote them all in verse. That was a very lucky beginning for me. I ended up writing about a dozen books for Putnam.

VC: To Make a Prairie: Essays on Poets, Poetry, and Country Living (1979) describes your work as a poet up to that period. Please provide us with an update. How do you work now as a writer of poetry? Could you illustrate your process of composing by leading us through the writing of a poem from *Looking for Luck: Poems* (1992)?

MK: Most often I start out on the typewriter. I tend to pull the page out of the machine and scribble on it. Then I run it through the typewriter again. That is my way of jump-starting what I did the preceding day. I have a special place where I write, an upstairs bedroom, which now serves as my study. However, because I travel so much, I am not always lucky enough to settle in there. I have learned to make use of free time wherever I am. I start many poems in airports because it seems I am in them much of the time. Travel is very useful for me. Being suspended in time and place seems to invite the muse. Also, there is no place where you have greater privacy than in a big, busy airport. You are totally anonymous. You could sit there for three days and nobody would notice you.

I use a pad and pencil at times, but I have a very bad habit of pulling the last blank pages out of paperback books and writing on those. Because I find it difficult to be on the road so much, I usually stock up on some paperbacks that I have been wanting to read. I might travel with four or five books that I am reading at once. I love to read what women are writing, whether it be novels, poems, or essays. That's my treat. I always have pens with me, and I just tend to scribble on those blank pages from the backs of the books. When I come home I use those pages to get me going. I also scribble in the margins of books as I am reading and later use those notes.

In terms of the writing of specific poems, it is difficult for a writer to say how he or she gets ideas for the poems. I try to remain open and receptive to anything that goes past. A writer must cultivate the art of observation. For example, I certainly had no initial intention of writing the poem "Praise Be," which is about the birth of a foal. It was a few months after the fact that I sat down and wrote it. The poem moves along chronologically to show exactly how the birth occurs, with a little prayer at the end. I almost didn't include it in the book because I was afraid it would sound sentimental. Some poet friends prevailed upon me and said the poem *is* full of sentiment, but it is *not* sentimental.

VC: You have written poetry for the full range of young readership, from poetry for very young children (*No One Writes a Letter to the Snail*) to poetry for the much older young adult audience (*Looking for Luck: Poems*). In recent years you have written much more for the older audience. Do you see this as just a natural progression in your writing?

MK: It is true I have written poetry for all age groups. It seems I haven't written as much recently for the youngest crowd, but I have three manuscripts circulating for younger readers. It is much more difficult today to sell children's books than it once was. In the past, money was being really pumped into public schools and children's books. In the sixties, there was plenty of Title IV money to pay for these books. Libraries also had big budgets to use when ordering children's books. There were many of us trying to write imaginatively for children. It seems there isn't that kind of receptivity today. The federal funds have pretty much dried up, and it is much harder for the commercial press to make a go of it. All this is sad but true. In any event, I hope my new manuscripts for younger readers will eventually find a home.

VC: No One Writes a Letter to the Snail is a classic of children's literature, characterized by light, humorous verse. Here we find poems about a fish who couldn't swim ("A Fish Who Could Not Swim"), the process of sneezing ("Sneeze"), and a polar bear needing no underwear ("Polar Bear"). The poems here celebrate the joys of life, and in particular the joys of childhood. When you wrote that, how much was the tone of that collection related to your view of what was appropriate, or not appropriate, in poetry for young children? Have these views changed?

MK: When I wrote that collection, I wasn't thinking of what was appropriate. Quite honestly, I was just thinking in each case about what worked as a poem. You get into a mode if you write light verse for children. It's fun. You take on a child's mind-set, and it is all verbal play and great sport. Poetry written for young children should reflect that. So I don't think I had a long-range, informed point of view as I wrote that collection. I was just playing with the language. I'm glad that collection is still so popular. Today writers have to worry about a different sort of marketability. Write a book about dinosaurs now, and you really have something. Television has also really cut into the market. There is a whole generation that just sits there and watches television and soaks up all that violence. Kids need to be reading and participating imaginatively in what they read. Poetry for children should celebrate life.

VC: As you wrote these poems, did you try them out on your own children?

MK: Oh, yes! They were always my guinea pigs. They were also a great inspiration for me. "A Fish Who Could Not Swim" I wrote for my youngest, who had so much difficulty learning how. I have been a swimmer all my life, so this really went to the core of the matter when I was unable to teach this child how to swim. It proves that kids can't be taught by relatives. Now I have my grandchildren listen to my writings. I have just finished a story I wrote specifically for my grandson who lives in Europe. Because he is just getting interested in horses, I wrote a horse story in rhyme. If you read material to youngsters as you go along, their reactions speak volumes.

VC: One of your more popular essays is "The Poet and the Mule," which appears in your book *In Deep* (1987). This essay details the parallels between the two creatures and ends with the thought that both mules and poets, as much as both continue to be misunderstood, will endure, will continue to evolve. How does Maxine Kumin see herself in terms of the thoughts found within this essay?

MK: I can tell you a little bit about the genesis of that essay, and this will tell my readers something about me. In 1981 and 1982 I was the

Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress. Two things were required of the consultant at that time: One was to give a public reading of one's own poetry, and the other was to give a formal lecture. My immediate superior was the assistant librarian; he was a wonderful person. I said to him, "I'm not an academic and I don't have a topic in mind at all." He said, "What would you write about if you could research something? If you had the time to research anything you wished, what would that be?" I said, "I've always been fascinated by mules." He said, "Great! Go ahead." I didn't know if I could get away with writing about mules, but I gave it a try. What I discovered, of course, is that the history of the mule in the United States is an agrarian history of our nation, a history of agriculture from the era of George Washington forward through two world wars. Mules had a lot to do with slavery and a lot to do with cotton, tobacco, and other Southern crops. Mules also had much to do with the ways in which the black man was perceived. At one time in history, the perception was that the only thing lower than the black man was the mule. It is a heartbreaking history if you investigate it. Then, very much tongue in cheek, I tried to make some sort of connection that would legitimize all this research. So I ended up writing the essay called "The Poet and the Mule." There is a somewhat tenuous connection between a poet and the mule in terms of the fact that we have endured even though we are not terribly popular. An amusing sidelight to this is that when the posters went out to be printed announcing the date and the title of my lecture, the typesetter thought it was a misprint, and he printed it up as "The Poet and the Muse." All the posters had to be reprinted.

VC: How have you "endured," and what do you see as the most significant evolution, in terms of style, in your work as a poet?

MK: It is very difficult to answer questions about a poet's style because that presumes a kind of self-consciousness on the part of the poet that probably the poet is afraid to have. If he or she becomes too conscious of what it is he or she is doing, then the poet fears losing the ability to do it. Much of what a poet does takes place on an unconscious level. You don't ever want to look behind you for fear you will turn into a pillar of salt. With all that said, I think that my style over the years has become rather more spare and more explicit and concrete. Looking back at some of my early work, I would say today I have pruned a lot of descriptive adjectives from my poems. I would say my poetry has become more muscular.

VC: You were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1973 for *Up Country: Poems of New England.* What were the immediate effects and what have been the long-term effects of being granted this great honor?

MK: The immediate effects and the long-term effects have pretty much been the same. Being granted that award gave me more visibility. I also got invited to give more readings, and I have been asked to run many workshops. The greatest effect, however, was monetary. Not vastly monetary, but I went from being a small fish in a small pond to a slightly larger fish in the same-sized pond. In terms of long-term effects, it also enabled me to appear in many anthologies; this added greater visibility to my work as a poet. This also gave me more credibility. I am very leery of prizes for this reason. I think that we set too much store by these prizes. The general public is afraid to evaluate work on its own, so it waits for committees to perform that function. That is unfortunate, because while one person gets a prize, there are undoubtedly several who are equally worthy in that same year. Therefore, I am a little bit humble about prizes, and a little cynical at the same time. I was told after the fact that one of the things that generated interest on the part of the committee that gave me the Pulitzer was they thought the collection was so "American." I guess it was all those country poems pulled together that impressed them. In some ways, it was just a lucky idea.

VC: A common thread running through and connecting your work for older readers is a celebration of the ordinary events of everyday life, especially those that are common to country living. Please tell us how this particular focus came about for you.

MK: It's true my poetry is definitely grounded in the world around me, the two hundred acres of hard-scrabble granite outcroppings, forests, and a mere fifteen acres cleared to pasture the hard way where we live. I look out the window and I see two horses across the way in one paddock and two horses just behind me up the hill in another. The lilacs are just beginning to open. The trees are just getting their leaves. The blackflies are awful. And while I think a person is lucky to live this life, it also means I get up at 5:30 in the morning in summer because I want to get my horses out on the grass a couple of hours before the bugs get atrocious. It also means we go to bed very early. It also means I am very aware of the seasons and the weather and what is going on with the livestock and the garden. This morning I spent four hours on my hands and knees setting out seedlings. This is my world pretty much, and it comprises what I write about.

VC: How would you like to see your own poetry introduced to young readers?

MK: It would be nice to have poetry read aloud to children, especially when they are not quite yet literate. It is fun for them to listen to poems. Then, as they are able to read for themselves, I hope that they will continue to find poetry enjoyable and fun. It should be fun, not something you have to sit down and study. Poetry *is* largely fun. I think kids pick up on that very quickly. My three-and-a-half-year-old grandson loves to rhyme. We talk in rhyme all the time. He gets such a bang out of coming up with rhyming words on his own. We may have another poet in the family. Above all, I hope for a good response from the reader. I hope that my readers will want to read more of my books.

VC: Related to your work as a writer, what plans do you have for the future?

MK: I have a new book that has just been listed for 1994 publication. It is a collection of prose essays and short stories full of animals that will be called *Women, Animals, and Vegetables: Essays and Stories.* Recently, I discovered something I hadn't really thought about that much before: It seems animals are present in everything I write. It's either sheep or cows or horses or dogs throughout. In this new book I have one story that is set in the American Virgin Islands. It even has tropical fish in it!

VC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers and those who work with these readers?

MK: My only advice or counsel to teachers and others who work with young readers would be to have fun with words. I would hope more wordplay would be encouraged among youngsters. Don't worry too much about spelling, although personally I am a crackerjack speller and misprints leap off the page at me. I think it is true in this era of spell-checks and computers that spelling could probably be taught a little later. I would certainly like to see grammar taught more. It is hardly part of the curriculum today. It seems sad to me that there isn't more precision in the language. But poetry is very precise, and maybe just inviting broader readership will steer people in that direction. You can't really fudge in poetry. You have to be very specific and clear. Clarity is a prime consideration if you want the poem to work. It has to be vivid, and in order to be vivid it has to focus sharply on observed details.

The only real message I have to pass on to readers is read, read, read. Don't just read one subject; read as broadly as you can. Read nature books. Read physics books. Read novels. Read poetry. Read everything. Read the message on the back of the toothpaste box. Read, read, read!

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Judith Thurman

Judith Thurman knew as early as the sixth grade that she wanted to be a writer when she grew up. As a youngster, she was always the "class poet," and later she became editor of her high school newspaper, an experience that brought her great joy and taught her much about the craft of writing. Thurman grew to love all types of literature and developed a special interest in the work of women writers, which today has become a focus of her writings for older readers. Her book I Became Alone: Five Women Poets *(1975), which explores the lives and works of Sappho, Louise Labé, Emily Dickinson, Anne Bradstreet, and Juana Ines de la Cruz, has introduced a generation of young adult readers to these influential women artists.*

In her poetry for younger readers, Thurman presents the epiphanies and revelations children have as their knowledge of the world expands. She describes these events as "the moments when something ordinary and something very deep come together." The speakers of her poems are inquisitive, thoughtful, creative. In developing these speakers, Thurman brings together a masterful balance of childhood imagination and adult reality, a characteristic of her work that adds an aura of excitement and wonder to each reading.

Today, Judith Thurman lives in New York City.

JC: Please tell us about your childhood.

JT: I grew up in New York City in the borough of Queens. My family lived in a housing development that was built after World War II. This was a great place for kids to live because we could all play in a huge courtyard in the center of the development. I was an only child, so I really appreciated the "instant family" this courtyard provided. I actually had a very uneventful childhood. I went to public schools during the school year and spent my summers either with my grandmother in Boston or away at camp.

When I was a child I was involved in all kinds of hobbies and activities. I was a great reader who carried a book everywhere. I also played the piano and loved to ice skate; skating was my major sport. I guess I would also have to admit that I was the great boss of the neighborhood. I was always organizing the children and inventing games and stories and plays. We used to act out stories from television shows and books we had read. We also had a lot of jump rope competitions and played games like "Flash Gordon" and "Peter Pan."

JC: What would you say was the spark that led to your development as a writer?

JT: Well, my mother had taught English and Latin and was a great editor. Even at an early age she taught me how to edit my writing: cut, paste, and rewrite. I also had a teacher in the sixth grade who was extremely interested in writing and encouraged me to write all that I could. I wrote more that year than any year up to that point. Because of her encouragement, I wrote story after story after story. She also had us write a composition titled "What I Hope to Be Doing in 10, 15, and 20 Years from Now." Even then I said I wanted to be a writer—and especially a journalist.

When I went to high school, my interest in writing grew. My high school was huge; there were over 3,600 kids there. I loved literature and reading and writing. I just couldn't get enough of those subjects. And, I was always the class poet. I became editor of the high school newspaper, an experience that shaped me and my writing greatly. The faculty adviser had been a former newspaper man. He was very demanding and really taught us to write and edit. He also introduced us to the "real world" of writing. Each month all of us on the newspaper staff would get on the subway and take the paper to a printer in Manhattan on the lower East Side. That was incredibly exciting.

JC: Who were others who influenced you as you developed as a writer? Do you recall reading and studying the works of specific poets?

JT: I have always loved the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Later, I even wrote a documentary film about her life and work for the "Voices and Visions" series, on PBS. I can't express just how much her work has touched me. I was also influenced by the work of Sylvia Plath. During my freshman year of college, the poet Robert Lowell came to campus to give a reading of his poems and Sylvia Plath's poems. She had just died, and none of us had ever heard of her. I sat there and listened to her poems and was overwhelmed by them. They inspired me greatly. After hearing her poems, I became very interested in women poets. I read everyone from Jean Stafford to Adrienne Rich to Louise Glück. However, of all the writers I discovered, I would have to say that Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath were probably the most formative influences on me when I started to write. Later on, when I started to write for children, Lilian Moore and Valerie Worth were my two great influences. Lilian's feeling for the child's sensual and emotional experience is very deep. I love Valerie Worth's economical, concrete way of looking at the world. Her work has been a great inspiration.

JC: How did you get started in the world of publishing?

JT: When I went away to college, I was really determined to become a writer. I majored in English and studied all I could about literature and language. I also started getting very serious about writing poetry. At that time, the *New York Times* still published poetry on the editorial page. I submitted a poem, and they bought it! That first publication gave me a tremendous shot of confidence and hope. After graduating from college, I went to live in Europe. I spent most of my days there writing poetry. While in England I met a wonderful old man named Jonathan Griffin, who was a poet and translator. He loved my work and introduced me to the publisher of Covent Garden Press. He was looking for new, young voices, and that is how *Putting My Coat On* (1972) came to be published. Many of the poems in this collection were based upon experiences from my childhood. My favorite poem in the collection was generated by an experience I had one night at my grandmother's house. She asked me to get her something from the porch. I was afraid to go, because I was sure there were bats out there. All the adults laughed at me and told me there weren't any bats. Well, I went out to the porch and there *were* bats. The punch line of the poem, which was really about life in general, was that we do have "bats"—dark fears—in our lives. The title poem in the collection, "Putting My Coat On," was really another reflection on the fears of childhood. You put your hand through the dark sleeve of a coat, not knowing if it is going to come out the other side. So even at this stage of my writing career I was starting to think in terms of the small but formative experiences that children have—the moments when something ordinary and something very deep come together. I was beginning to *think* like a children's poet.

When I got back to the States, I needed a job. A friend from college suggested I go see Lilian Moore, who was working at Scholastic. Lilian encouraged me to continue my writing, and together we did an anthology of poetry for children called *To See the World Afresh* (1974). Working with her was a wonderful experience. And, the book became an ALA Notable Book. It was also through Lilian's encouragement that I started putting together *Flashlight and Other Poems,* which was finally published in 1976. Lilian has been a very generous and wise mentor, and I'm very grateful to her.

My next project involved writing a couple of books for a series that Lilian was editing for Macmillan. These were books that had a limited vocabulary, so I had to be very inventive with a short word list. I really enjoyed writing these—they were quite a challenge! Then I wanted to do something for older readers, so I started working on *I Became Alone: Five Women Poets*. This book brought together my interest in women writers and poetry. From there, my publishing career took off.

JC: Tell us about your work habits as a writer.

JT: I revise my writing over and over and over, like a cat with a mouse: I worry it to death. I chase it, push it away, pull it back, and cross it out. But who's the cat—who's the mouse? They're both me. As a result, writing is very torturous, generally. I never get anything right the first time. My first drafts are such garbage—completely unusable. Only I could see that there is anything there. I'm very stubborn and write endlessly until I feel the words are as close to right as they can be. At first, that sense of rightness is elusive, but a writer has to hold out for it.

When I write poetry, I have to feel suspended in time. I *need* this feeling of timelessness. I have to be able to lose myself completely in the poem. I can't feel pressured to produce. Writing poetry is not something I could ever do with a deadline. It is a relationship with the past and a way through the present. At best, writing is contemplative for me. That's what I love about it.

I also like to write in bed in the morning. That is where some of my best poetry has been written. I'll wake up, grab a pencil, and jot down thoughts in a poetry notebook before I get too much awake. I don't worry about revision; that can come later.

JC: As you write, do you have any special habits, customs, or observances you follow?

JT: I do have a few activities that help get me going when I'm stuck for ideas. If I can't think of exactly what to write or how to express something, I take the poem out to a coffee shop. I work on it there in a public place, and then I go back to some place private. I like to alternate between noisy, public places and very quiet, private ones to sort of jog the process. If I'm really stuck, I'll also read certain other writers whose prose, for some mysterious reason, triggers my own. They are an eclectic bunch: Joan Didion, Flaubert, Mavis Gallant, Virginia Woolf, Isak Dinesen. For the writing of my children's poetry, I turn to the work of

Valerie Worth. There is something about their styles, their rhythms, that ease me into my own work.

JC: A hallmark of your poetry is the development of a central, visual image. In many poems in *Flashlight and Other Poems* (like "Oil Slick," "Hydrant," "The Little Rain"), one powerful visual image becomes the focus of an event or description, and the rest of the poem serves to amplify and expand upon this image.

JT: In my poetry I like to write about one experience. Sometimes it is extremely focused, as in "Oil Slick," and sometimes it's a composite of many different situations. I like to work "small." When I branched out from poetry to prose projects, I found it unbelievably hard to fill two pages. Two pages seemed like such a vast expanse. What I try to capture in my poems are sense images—memories. These small sense memories are connected to our very deep experiences and emotions. I find that my writing works best if I try to organize these feelings and experiences around one central image. This is just how I see the events of the world.

JC: Another characteristic of your poetry is the unexpected comparison. In *Flashlight and Other Poems,* a reader will see that a flashlight is compared to the yellow eye of a hound ("Flashlight"), a flock of birds is like a handful of coins dropped suddenly ("Spill"), eyelids are squeezed tightly so as to resemble the wings of a caught moth ("pretending to sleep"). These comparisons add a dimension of surprise and joy to your poems.

JT: I make these comparisons because I see them. I have learned about myself that when I'm thinking and feeling metaphorically, the deeper I get involved in writing poetry. I think the power to associate objects in this fashion is in many ways a physical talent, like dancing. It's a form of coordination. Once a writer starts to be aware of any sort of peculiarity in the universe, he or she will focus on that. My own peculiarity was to see how one strange thing resembled something else completely different. The challenge, then, is to capture these comparisons within the poem.

JC: A common element in your poetry is the use of the imagination. The speakers in the poems use this imagination to create a world that offers unlimited possibilities for a child (creating with clay in "Playing with Clay," imagining the closet is a forest in "Closet," and seeing the shadows on the fire escape as the stripes of a zebra in "Zebra," all from *Flashlight and Other Poems*).

JT: During my childhood I grew up in what I would call a limited environment. I wasn't surrounded by nature at all. Our brand-new development had been plunked down on a little hill where all the trees and most of the grass had to be cleared away. As a result, I think I had to use my imagination more under those circumstances. I lived in books, and I imagined other worlds. The ability to travel through those books and thoughts was very important to me. I devoured books about Europe, history, and children who lived in different ages. I had a hunger for a kind of richness and adventure that the very ordinary circumstances of the place where I grew up didn't offer. I simply had to make the best of what I had, which was my imagination. I didn't ever have a dog, but If I could imagine a large coat as a bear, that was almost as good.

JC: In *Lost & Found* (1978), the reader is given a delightful look at the change that enters the lives of all and how this can be exciting for the young. Here things are lost (a scarf), things are found (a horseshoe), events are cyclical (a snake shedding its skin). You are able to capture this ever-changing world in your poetry and do so in a way that seems exciting rather than frightening.

JT: I have never feared change myself. On the contrary, I have always been very adventurous and enjoyed new experiences. I see the world as a great storehouse of revelations waiting for the right key. I think most children also have this feeling. When I was in college I went to all kinds of places by myself with a kind of innocence toward the dangers involved. I saw no reason not to go to Morocco or Venice on my own and wander around. Looking back on it now, I can't believe I did these things. I wasn't a wild adventurer; I was just curious—and greedy for experience.

I guess you could say I've always been very independent. I don't know if it is because I'm an only child or for some other reason. I do believe that some of this independent spirit grew because I had a very protective mother. When I was a small child, she sheltered me as much as she could—even to the point of making me report home immediately after school. I rebelled against her fearfulness by seeking change, challenge, the unfamiliar, and the unexpected.

JC: Your book *I Became Alone: Five Women Poets* is a detailed account of the lives and poetry of Sappho, Louise Labé, Emily Dickinson, Anne Bradstreet, and Juana Ines de la Cruz. How did this project come about?

JT: I started on this book in the early 1970s, when there was an intense interest in "lost women"—that is, those whose work was just being rediscovered by a new generation of readers. I had written two articles on lost women writers for the new *Ms.* magazine. One piece was about Louise Labé, and the other was about Juana Ines de la Cruz. I had always been interested in women writers, especially women poets, and for a long time I had been thinking about putting together a book about women poets for younger readers. I was thinking of such a project especially for young women because that was a period when women were reaching out for new models, exploring new possibilities and ways of feeling. I felt they should have a book that described the lives and works of bold and successful women artists. I had the background for the project; I had lived in Europe, spoke four languages—which helped with translation—and knew about many writers who were virtually unknown here, like Louise Labé. After I had published the two pieces in *Ms.*, it was just a matter of diversifying the group of writers. So, that's how that book came about. I hope young readers find it interesting and enjoyable and above all that it gives their own work inspiration.

JC: How would you like to see your poetry introduced to young readers?

JT: I would like to see poetry introduced the way I introduced it to my son. When a loving, enthusiastic person reads it to a child, the child always responds. When Will was two years old, we were living in Paris. I had brought with us a copy of Lilian Moore's book *I Feel the Same Way.* Each day I would read a few poems to him, and he was enthralled by their sounds, their rhymes, their surprises. He would repeat words after me—words like "whoosh" and "swoosh." After reading the poems we would talk more about their subjects—wind, the sea, make-believe, the city—and he could talk about his own feelings and perceptions. Sharing a poem should be an intimate experience, like sharing a treat or a secret. But it can be done that way in the classroom. Perhaps the children might make a circle on the floor rather than sit at their desks. If the teacher has a personal response, she or he should share it. Poetry and storytelling go back to the experience of tribal people at their campfires. This old-fashioned—even ancient—oral tradition of sharing poetry is great and is something that should be commemorated.

JC: You moved away from writing poetry for a time, in the 1980s, to pursue other duties and projects. Please tell us about those.

JT: In order to earn a living as a writer, one usually has to do things other than or in addition to the writing of poetry. My biggest project was a biography of Isak Dinesen, *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (1982). It won the National Book Award in 1983, and was used as the basis for the movie *Out of Africa*. That was a seven-year project. It was very successful and fulfilling to work on it. For the past five years I have also done quite a lot of literary criticism for the *New Yorker* and other magazines. At present I am also writing a biography of Colette. I'm sure before it is finished it will be a five-year project. Knopf is going to publish it.

I also have notes for another book of poems for children. I love the challenge of writing for the younger reader, especially those who are just becoming verbal. It's a magic moment when something in the language provides a wonderful surprise for them. For some children, every new word is a delightful surprise. The challenge for the poet is to capture the strangeness and power of language in a form that is recognizable to the young reader.

Also, part of the reason I've worked on projects other than poetry has to do with the elusive sense of "timelessness," the contemplative nature of poetry, that we mentioned earlier. When you divide your time between earning a living as a writer and mothering a young child, it is difficult to find the peaceful space poetry requires—at least for me. Something is always tugging you back to the present: the need to cook a meal, to do laundry, to pay bills, to sit and play games. Perhaps as the needs of my family grow less demanding, I will find more time for poetry. Right now, I don't have the solitude or the sense of distance from the bustle of the world. I remember when I was in Paris, a friend lent me a seventh-floor maid's room. I loved this little attic room with its bull's-eye window, and while there I wrote notes for many poems. I write my nonfiction in an office. I can't imagine writing poetry in an office. For poetry, I have to be curled up in an armchair, in a café, on a boat or train—anywhere but an office. For me, regimentation does *not* lead to poetry. So, more poetry will be coming for me if and when I can put myself into the right psychic space for it.

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

JT: It is thrilling for me that there is such an appetite for and interest in poetry. I believe there is nothing that forges a relationship with language more than the reading of poetry. And poetry is very intimate. When you read a poem, it is like having a very intimate conversation with someone you know well; good poetry reveals something of another person's soul. For me, poetry has been spiritually nourishing. It is good nourishment—the best nourishment. I hope all readers can discover this.

I would also like to encourage children to write their own poetry. Keep a journal. Try to catch those experiences which are so fleeting and precious, like my experience with the bats or the fear of putting a hand through a sleeve and having it get swallowed up. If you can write down those moments as they happen, you will have a valuable record that you can go back to later on. It will help you write—and will help you learn more about yourself.

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Nancy White Carlstrom

Nancy White Carlstrom's poetry celebrates the world of the young child. In her writings, events such as getting dressed in the morning, finding a prize in the cereal box, and watching snowflakes fall gently to the ground hold great wonder and possess infinite possibilities. The speakers of these poems are developing an emerging awareness of their surroundings. Through their explorations, they have fun—they relish every minute of life. These events and feelings combine to create an uplifting and joyful tone. Carlstrom says, "I want my books to be houses, safe for exploring, questioning, soaring, spreading one's wings,—houses where hope still lives and language sings from the heart."

Carlstrom's writing has undergone a dramatic transformation since her move in 1987 to Fairbanks, Alaska. She now feels a closer bond with the natural world that is expressed beautifully in such books as Goodbye Geese *(1991),* Northern Lullaby *(1992), and* The Snow Speaks *(1992), all written after her move. For Carlstrom, nature has become both a source of strength and inspiration, feelings that she passes along through her poetry to her young readers.*

Today, Nancy White Carlstrom lives with her husband and two sons in a log home on the outskirts of Fairbanks, Alaska.

Photo: Stu Rothman

JC: Please tell us about your childhood and development as a writer.

NC: This surprises many children, but I grew up without television. We didn't have a TV. Looking back now, I'm glad . . . I guess. Instead of sitting in front of a television, I recall that we spent most of our time outdoors. We lived in a neighborhood where there were many other children, and it was just natural for us to do most of our playing out of the house. We were fortunate to have plenty of places to play; there were fields and woods nearby where we created imaginative games. There was even a deserted shack, which we took over as a clubhouse. There was also a vacant lot on our street where we held circus performances and talent shows. Many enjoyable times were spent playing with friends in these wonderful places.

As far as my writing is concerned, I can only remember back to the second grade. That was when I really started writing. I remember I wrote several plays that were performed in class. I wrote all through elementary school, but unfortunately I didn't save many of those pieces. I do have some poems from junior high and high school, but now when I read them I must admit they are kind of embarrassing. It's interesting, but compared to what I am writing now, those poems were so different—much darker and heavier in tone, maybe typical of what all junior high and high school students write. The themes of those early poems were about old age and dying. I guess those were subjects I was thinking about at the time.

Although we had Golden Books and a few of the classics in our home, I primarily grew up on the Bible. Even as a young child I enjoyed the language of the Psalms. They were very important to me and still are. My parents were not library users, but when I was in the third or fourth grade some new neighbors introduced me to that wonderful place. I got my own library card and was hooked for life. I even worked in the children's department of our local library all through high school. It was there I really became interested in children's books.

JC: Would you say your work in the children's section was the spark that led to your writing career?

NC: I think it really was. I can also remember during breaks going over and thumbing through writer's magazines in the section for adults. I was especially interested in looking at all the writing contests listed. But then and for many years after, I think I liked the *idea* of being a writer. I did not know about the hard work and discipline it takes to actually *be* a writer.

JC: What were the texts and who were the people that influenced you most as you developed as a writer?

NC: As a child, the book I most remember reading is *Little Women,* again, I think because I identified with Jo and her desire to be a writer. My father had a playful sense of language and used to recite humorous poems to us and make up stories. In more recent years I think the work of Margaret Wise Brown has influenced me. Although I did not grow up on her books, my children have.

JC: You were once the owner of a bookstore called The Secret Garden Children's Bookshop. Would you say operating that bookshop influenced your work as a writer?

NC: Definitely. I started that bookshop in March of 1977 and concentrated on providing our customers with quality literature. Since I did a lot of book-related programs for children and adults, I thought of myself more as a children's literature specialist than a bookseller. It was natural for my desire to write to resurface at this time when I was so immersed in wonderful books. During the summer of 1981 I was part of a writer's workshop with Jane Yolen at a writers' conference in Port Townsend, Washington. During that workshop I wrote *Wild Wild Sunflower Child Anna* (1987) in its entirety. I was greatly encouraged by Jane's response to that manuscript. Because of the support shown by her, as well as the other workshop participants, I went home confident this manuscript would be accepted. At the same time, I remembered Jane's word of caution: "This is poetry and it may take a while to get accepted." She was right. I sent it out to thirteen different publishers over four years. And even though it was the first book I wrote, *Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear?* (1986) was the first to be published.

JC: Is it correct that you received over eighty rejection letters before your first book was published?

NC: That is correct, but the letters weren't for the same piece; they were for a number of picture book manuscripts I sent out. Actually, I keep finding more rejection letters from way back—1974 and 1975—so, realistically, that total is probably well over a hundred.

JC: How did you keep from getting discouraged?

NC: After taking that workshop with Jane, I became part of a writer's group. We met weekly in Seattle, and all of us in the group encouraged each other. Most of us were getting only rejection letters at that time, and it was very helpful to have a support group. We used to critique not only our manuscripts but our rejection letters, too! In order to become a writer, you have to be very persistent and somehow separate that rejection from your own self-esteem. Some people can't handle that. I think it helps if you are in a group where you are all sort of in the same boat.

I sold the bookshop when our son was about a year old so I could have more time to be with him and also to be able to concentrate more on my writing. Another year went by before my first manuscript was accepted. That year was a frustrating time in some ways because I kept having second thoughts about selling the bookstore. I thoroughly enjoyed being a bookseller and really loved matching up people and books. However, when that first manuscript was accepted, I knew it was all worth the wait.

JC: Please tell us about your work habits as a writer.

NC: Most of my writings have come out in the past seven years, years during which my children have been very young. As a result, my writing has had to fit in among family activities. At first I thought, "Gee, once my kids get in school full-time, I'll have so much more time to write and I'll get so much more done. . . ." Well, last year was the first year both of my sons were in school all day long, and I discovered I couldn't work as well having large chunks of time. I was so used to fitting my writing in as I did other things. I found I couldn't spend all day, every day in my little cabin, which is where I work. I love this place—a small log cabin right near our house. But I can't spend all my time there.

On the other hand, if I get too busy with other activities, volunteering and being with friends and family, and don't have time for quiet reflection and writing, things get out of whack in a hurry. I guess for me, the key is balance. My experiences with people, this place, this world, feed and nourish me as a writer. And likewise, my time alone, writing, makes me a better person to be with. Just ask my husband and sons. They'll tell you!

It's nice having a separate place for writing, but I can write anywhere. I work a great deal while on airplanes now that I'm spending more time going out to speak in the schools. I really enjoy uninterrupted time. Also, my boys are into sports, so I'll often write while watching them practice. Most of my ideas have grown out of our family, so my writing is really tied into being a parent.

Quite often when I write, what will happen is that I'll first get a title or a phrase and write that down or type it into the computer. Then, usually I don't work on it for quite a while. When I go out to talk with kids, I always tell them it is sort of like cooking a pot of stew. The ideas are simmering there on the back burner, and I keep tossing in ingredients—but the ideas are not quite ready yet. I very rarely sit down and write something as soon as I have the idea. It needs that time to simmer, and sometimes if the right time doesn't come for two or three years, it can be a long process.

Also, many of my poems and stories start as little songs, and I sing them as I write them. Sometimes after I write the poem or book, I won't remember the tune. There are other times when the tunes have stayed with me for years. When I do a program for young children, I always sing some of them. I think that is really important, even though I wouldn't call myself a musician. With young children, chants and songs are so important, and this all ties in with poetry being their natural language.

JC: In 1987 you moved from Seattle, Washington, to Fairbanks, Alaska. How would you say this move has most influenced your writing—and in particular your poetry?

NC: The move *greatly* influenced my writing. I remember one day my husband showed to me a little classified ad that he found in the *Seattle Times* about the need for a marketing director of the airport in Fairbanks. I said, "Fairbanks, Alaska? I know it's north, but how far north?" Now I know just how far north it is. There has been nothing more stimulating for my writing than our move here. In Seattle, we lived right in the city on Queen Anne Street, so the move to the countryside here just opened a whole new world for me. I can say it was directly because of the move that I came to write *Northern Lullaby, Goodbye Geese, The Snow Speaks,* and a number of other pieces. This was particularly so with *Northern Lullaby,* which I wrote the first winter we moved up here. Everything was new and fresh, and I felt much closer to nature. Nature seemed to become part of our family. One night our son Jesse, who was four and a half then, said, "Good night, Mommy moon." And I said, "Good night, Jesse star." The next morning I started writing *Northern Lullaby.* That writing didn't have to simmer as much, probably because it was a response to what I was experiencing right then. I can remember madly writing as I sat in my car outside Jesse's preschool while waiting for him to come out. *Northern Lullaby* was accepted in 1987, but it didn't come out for five years. Many people don't realize the process is a long one in terms of a publishing timetable, especially with picture books.

Then, the same sort of thing happened with *Goodbye Geese.* It was during our first autumn that I couldn't help but notice how everyone and everything seemed to be getting ready for the winter. *Goodbye Geese* was my own response to that. I really wrote it as an adult poem and then translated it into more childlike form. So definitely, the move has really given me lots of new material.

JC: Your poetry in *Graham Cracker Animals 1-2-3* (1989) is characterized by regularly structured rhythm and rhyme. This adds a predictability to the lines that allows the reader to move swiftly from image to image, idea to idea.

NC: This book started out with poems like "Me, Me, Me," "Apples, Apples, Apples," and "Wheels, Wheels, Wheels." I first wrote them as text for either a board book or a very, very young poem. When I decided to do a collection, they set the tone. I wanted to keep all the other poems as simple as they were. It may surprise some, but I really don't like to write in rhyme. I think it is very hard to use it well. It's easy to do poor rhyme. For that reason, quite often I'll resist writing a story or poem in rhyme. But, sometimes I find that a piece seems to have a mind of its own and I have to follow—which often includes using rhyme.

I recall Dr. Seuss once said something to the effect that rhyme has to sound easy. It has to sound like you knocked it out on a Friday afternoon. If it has that quality, it really gets kids into it and they keep reading. But, if you have one bad line, you have to throw out a whole verse or it will stick out badly from the rest. What happens is you will have three good lines but you can't come up with a rhyme to finish the fourth. You don't want to sacrifice those three good lines, so a bad rhyme is thrown in. Poor rhyme many times is created just that way—because of that bad fourth line. If rhyme works, I think it is great.

I was writing the poems in *Graham Cracker Animals 1-2-3* when my own children were very young, four and a half years old and one year old. Young children love rhyme. *They* did especially, so I'm sure that influenced me as I wrote these.

JC: In a related area, the poems in this collection—and even their titles—are enriched by the use of exact repetition of words and phrases (repetition of "Silly-willy" in "Silly, Silly, Silly," repetition of "pockets" in "Pockets, Pockets, Pockets," repetition of "Sticky-licky" in "Birthday, Birthday, Birthday"). This repetition adds another dimension to the sound effects found within the poems.

NC: Again, I was thinking of the very young child when I wrote these poems. The young children I have been around and have read about *do* love repetition. They love to roll the sounds of words on their tongues. When I first opened the bookshop I discovered a book called *From Two to Five* by Kornei Chukovsky, considered to be the dean of Russian children's literature. He studied young children for many years and believed poetry to be their natural language. Many of his observations confirmed my own experience. Use of repetition in poetry plays upon their natural tendencies of speech. I have heard young children say words over and over, especially a rhythmic phrase, purely for the fun of it. Because of the tightly structured patterns in the poems in *Graham Cracker Animals 1-2-3*, I've had a number of teachers use this book in the primary grades to initiate poetry writing. However, the audience I was aiming at was definitely preschool age.

JC: Another characteristic of your poetry is the short, tight line. In very short spaces you are able to build powerful descriptions. Is there a particular reason or philosophy or belief behind this characteristic of your poetry?

NC: Writing, for me, is a "cutting away" process, whether the writing involves stories or poems. I always start out with more words than I need, and then I do revisions. I cut away and cut away and try to get down to the bare bones of what I want to say. I'm now working on a novel, and it has been very difficult for me to write it. Even though it is probably going to be a very short novel, it's a different process, one I'm not entirely comfortable with yet. It has been difficult because rather than building, I'm still cutting away.

JC: You tend to write for a very young audience. For you, what is the most difficult—and easiest—aspect of writing for this young child?

NC: In terms of what is most difficult for me, that has to be use of rhyme. I know rhyme is loved by children, but it is difficult to pull off. In terms of the easiest aspect, most of my poems for younger children were written when my own children were quite young, so it just seemed very natural for me to write them the way I did. It really was not that difficult. I think now that my children are getting older, my own interests are possibly also getting older. For instance, the new poetry collection I have coming out in the fall of 1995, *Midnight Dance of the Snowshoe Hare*, is a group of poems all set here in Alaska. These poems are definitely "older." This is a poem from the new collection. It is called "Young Wolf."

Young Wolf
from tilt of head
to droop of tail.
You wear your wildness well

It stretches taut
over your haunches
and rides your shadow
through the changing woods.

(© 1994 by Nancy White Carlstrom)

These poems are quite a bit different from poems like those in *Graham Cracker Animals 1-2-3.* I'm pretty excited about this collection.

JC: In books like *Graham Cracker Animals 1-2-3, Northern Lullaby,* and *Goodbye Geese,* you write about the common, the ordinary events of life. At the same time, these common events are presented through a tone of wonder and curiosity. As a result, your writings are uplifting—they reflect the joys of living.

NC: No matter how bad things get, in this world or in my life, I do believe in joy and hope because I believe there's someone greater than myself in charge. It is my own religious faith that affects both the way I live my life and the way I write. There's a line in a Dylan Thomas poem, "Poem in October," that says, "Sing alive the mystery." That's what I want my poems to do. I believe there is a mystery to life. We can't always figure everything out. There's a mystery even in writing, too. I can't always explain exactly why my poems come out the way they do, but there is a joy that I have that I do want to express. And for me, writing is my way of celebrating. It can also be my way of crying. When I feel most strongly about something, I write it down. So, writing is really my way of expressing emotions.

JC: A related feature of your poetry, and one seen in *It's About Time, Jesse Bear: And Other Rhymes* (1990), is that the characters in your poems seem to be having great fun. At the same time, they can be rascals and mischievous (spilling the cereal in "Cubby Crunchies," playing in puddles in "The Puddle Song," making a huge mess with food in "Yum! Yum!").

NC: I think this characteristic reflects our own family life and possibly me looking back at my own memories of growing up. It's sad but true that children today are faced with so many heavy themes and serious matters to deal with in their everyday lives. I remember the first copy of *Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear?* came to me when my own son was three and a half. I read it to him as we sat together on the couch. At the end of the book he said, "Mommy, I want to live in that house." I was so excited by that comment. I said to myself, "I think this book is going to work!" Today, I tell people that in many ways I want my books to be houses that children want to live in. The endings may not always be happy and the families may not always get along, but within these places and relationships—family, neighborhood, the world—there is at least a striving for harmony. I want my books to be houses, safe for exploring, questioning, soaring, spreading one's wings—houses where hope still lives and language sings from the heart.

JC: What other writings are in the works?

NC: I have four more poetry collections coming out. *Midnight Dance of the Snowshoe Hare* will be published by Philomel Books in the fall of 1995. *Rosie's Giggle Wiggle Day,* which is the tentative title, will also be published by Philomel in 1996. It is a collection of story poems for fairly young children. Macmillan will be publishing *Who Says Boo? Halloween Poems for Young Children* in 1995. Then, I will have another Jesse Bear book coming out called *Out We Go, Jesse Bear.* It is a book of counting poems. I also have several other picture books which will appear soon. I really consider these to be poems. Another book, *What Would You Do If You Lived at the Zoo?* (1994) will be coming out this spring.

JC: Do you have a special message you'd like to pass along to your readers?

NC: First of all, I want my writing to be accessible to all kinds of children. I would hope that in reading my poems, children develop a sense of play with language and are stimulated to express their own emotions through reading and writing poetry. Because I want young readers to identify, I put in all the things they like to do and more. I want to include a touch of mystery, an imaginative twist, to stretch them.

I feel very privileged to be able to write out of my experience and that of my family's and sometimes to strike a universal chord, which allows a poem or a book to have a life of its own. It does not always happen, but when it does, it's wonderfully satisfying and becomes a shared joy.

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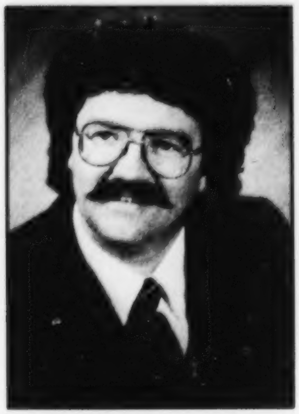
Editors



Vorland Photography

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Vorland Photography

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